

# THE POSITION OF CHINA AND AMERICA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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## **Abstract**

*South China Sea's geopolitics is affecting the region as the two major global powers, China and the US are the parties in this conflict. Both have varying geopolitical interests which needs to be analysed to understand the regional geopolitics. To determine their ties, this paper focus on understanding the differences between the two states, the growing power and affirmation of China, and its priorities and policies in search and protection of its interests. There is a disparity in the region where China is trying to strengthen its position in the area, while America wishes to uphold the existing status quo. The paper argues that, in such situation, it is hard to see prospects for Chinese-US collaboration in the South China Sea.*

**Keywords:** America, China, South China Sea, Cooperation.

## **Introduction**

China's regional presence has undergone drastic shifts. China has been more involved and engaged in numerous regions and has also demonstrated its military capability. China has always been viewed as a competitor and often as a US ally. America's interests in the region of Asia-Pacific are diverse, and they have established an alliance structure with the nations such as Australia, Japan, and India that would make the region reasonably secure. Concerning maritime strength, which is perceived to be vital in the South China Sea, the US does not have a rival and, the above countries still have a stake in opposing China in the South China Sea. However, China has taken a step in this direction at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has started spending much capital to enhance maritime capability.<sup>1</sup> The disagreement between the Diaoyu and the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and the South China Sea condition applies to China's current strategy. The South China Sea is a conflict among six parties. Three of them are the major pivotal: the Philippines, Vietnam, and China, as opposed to the controversy over the Diaoyu and the Senkaku Islands, where two countries China and Japan make territorial claims. In

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addition to the nations that make land claims, other players in the region have also pursued a beneficial resolution following this conflict. The complicated condition also made possible the UN Convention's interference on the Seas, which failed to settle such a conflict after China dismiss the judgment in 2016 on arbitration between the Philippines and China.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to see a situation in which all these conflicts will be settled in such circumstances. The South China Sea's geopolitical importance and numerous priorities and results awaited in several nations in the region hamper a potential settlement gradually. The current examination considers the strongest powers in the field, including America and China, who can control and adjust the effects of such conflicts. The two countries in the South China Sea have varying geopolitical interests, and the current analysis is intended to analyse their relations in the region. To determine their ties, the paper focuses on the understanding distance between America and China, the growing power and affirmation of China, and its priorities and policies in search and protection of its interests. Lastly, some opportunities for America and China relations in the South China Sea and their likely consequences are provided.

## **South China Sea**

The vast expanse of the South China Sea is sometimes divided by a thin strip of beach. The islands are remote, even small, but form the fierce territorial conflict involving six major plaintiffs: Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, China, and Brunei. Since the nine-dash line was released, China's perceived designs on the South China Sea have increasingly affected the region. In 2012, when Scarborough Shoal was grabbed out of the Philippines, Beijing shared some of these fears. The two countries had quarrelled over Chinese fishermen's accusations of illicit fishing. Following a standoff lasting two months, each side decided to leave the Shoal. Philippines followed the agreement and left the Shoal, but China did not. China has since removed the boats of the Philippines from the seas of the Shoal. In reaction to this move, Manila lodged an arbitration lawsuit against China under the United Nations laws.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines claimed to concentrate on maritime law problems, while China contended that they could not be addressed without agreeing on territorial issues.<sup>4</sup> Beijing has also declined to participate in the hearings, even though it has drafted and officially circulated a paper against the case's authority. In addition to China's papers, the Philippines has proposed its memorial. Both countries are pending a verdict by the Tribunal regarding their authority.<sup>5</sup> With the case in the past, China has taken an increasingly strong position in the field. In 2014, a state-owned Chinese oil company moved to the Paracel Islands (Vietnam's south area). This aggression has led to confrontations between Chinese and Vietnamese ships and disruptions against foreign firms in areas of Vietnam. Furthermore, the

claimants have launched land recovery efforts in the South China Sea over the past years.

### **The Strategic Perspective of China**

As some scholars pointed out, the six core interests of China are: 1) national reunification; 2) territorial integrity; 3) national security; 4) state sovereignty; 5) the legally developed democratic structure of China and social stability; 6) necessary guarantees for social progress and a sustainable economy. In settling China's disputes over the islands' rights, adherence to diplomatic and peaceful measures can serve territorial integrity, national security, and state sovereignty. In contrast, long-term disputes or even military wars with related nations may be generated using territorial integrity and state sovereignty against China's legally defined political structure and global social stability. So, the central challenge to China's diplomacy is to establish a situation in which territorial integrity and state sovereignty jointly foster ties with China's constitutional political system and overall social integrity. China has border with 14 countries, including India and Russia. Meanwhile, Beijing has differences with Korea and Japan over maritime demarcation at the East China Sea, land differences on the Diaoyu Islands with Japan, and differences over territorial rights and maritime demarcation on South China islands with Southeast Asia, such as Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These issues form the major Chinese priorities in territorial integrity and state sovereignty. Regarding the fusion of territorial integrity and state sovereignty of two core interests, each of the above-mentioned territorial conflicts is geographical. China made numerous diplomatic attempts for a long time to deal with territorial disputes both on land and at sea with neighbouring nations. The 1962 Chinese self-defence counterattack at the China-India border shows two countries addressing a territorial difference by war. The signing of the Russian-Chinese Boundary Treaty of 1999 was a peaceful settlement of the territorial dispute. The Sino-Japanese controversy over territorial control over the Diaoyu Islands has become a military and diplomatically unprecedented and heated question for both nations. The Diaoyu conflict is a "regional main interest", compared with the general interest in territorial integrity and state sovereignty. But the geographical existence of certain central interests does not simply mean less important in the sequence of strategic goals between the different core interests. Japan's provocations have intensified and exacerbated the regional contradiction to the degree of "strategic confrontation" between Japan and China. The Chinese-Japanese island conflict is at the frontline of the fight for a specific time to defend core national interests. Therefore, the inconsistencies between Japan and China have been confrontational. In the long run, however, perpetual hostility between Japan and China may have severe repercussions. The

contradiction between Japan and China in regional, national preferences doesn't mean that their real national interests are entirely against each other.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Main Interests of America**

In the South China Sea, the US priorities could be seen as simpler than in China. It doesn't imply that they are less important or less significant. Unlike China, America has not made territorial demands in the South China Sea, but it has other concerns.<sup>7</sup> First of all, the US recognises that it should carry out peaceful military drills with coastal states under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but does not subscribe to UNCLOS to invoke these principles. China's responses to these types of actions reflect its resolve, which is believed to be unfriendly and aggressive. Thus, the US and Chinese gaps in freedom of navigation are more complex. Indeed, China does not have an incentive to hinder maritime trade and merely needs to ensure that maritime trade is smoothly conducted. But America still sees naval actions within the Chinese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as part of high seas liberties related to free navigation.<sup>8</sup> America is also involved in safeguarding navigational independence in the South China Sea, including the Chinese EEZ's friendly military activities. Another aspect affecting America's rights is the need for the opposing claimants to obey the laws laid down by global law. John Kerry (Secretary of State) stated that America has a national interest in preserving peace and security, unimpeded lawful trade, respect for international law, and navigational freedom in the Sea of South China. In this respect, America will reject China's use of force to settle its conflicts or change its Southern China Sea status quo. International law is the sole instrument regarding maritime freedom. Additionally, the Obama government has already stressed that America considers establishing SCS rule-based stability to be an important national interest.

### **The State of Relations between China and America**

First, there is a knowledge divide and a degree of distrust that appears impossible to shift in the foreseeable future. While China believes it to be sovereign over the entire region of the nine-dash line, in this instance, as it is not a member, the US follows UNCLOS's values and notes that Beijing has no privileges over the whole area. On the one side, China underlined that UNCLOS does not have any authority over the South China Sea conflicts. On the other side, the US respects and recognizes the Tribunal's arbitration and its decision. Additionally, China claims that the US does not have any right to engage in conflicts over the South China Sea, also accusing it of hypocrisy. For Beijing, America is a destabilising force in the South China Sea and a threat to its global ambitions and aspirations. Moreover, China finds US actions in its EEZ violent and unfriendly, while, according to UNCLOS, the US

invokes its right to carry out peaceful military action with the EEZ nations. It explains many frictions and disputes, and a degree of suspicion distinguishes relationships in the South China Sea. In this respect, the South China Sea stresses the uncertainty of its relations and the numerous opinions that the United States and China have in certain ways.

Secondly, China's rising influence and affirmation contribute to America becoming increasingly active in the Asia-Pacific region. The condition takes place in periods where the US faces many other issues, such as the nuclear projects in Iran and North Korea, disorders in Iraq and Syria, the case of the Islamic State, the breakdown of links with Russia, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the security dilemmas created first by America and then by China between its Southern China neighbours have made US participation and interests in the region more possible. Their associations in the South China Sea have also shifted considerably. Minor tensions are starting to happen, and China is also more anxious and alert to keep America close to its borders.

Thirdly, their priorities align in just one way: protecting the sea route across the South China Sea. On the one hand, China is interested in managing the nine-dashed region and its assets. On the other hand, the US also needs a good position in the Asia-Pacific; it does not want China to dominate the bulk of the South China Sea or a rival in the region. Furthermore, the United States must convince its allies in the area and prove that it can defend them against the Chinese growing strength and aggressiveness. The Asia-Pacific region remains important to them. These competing interests have dramatically led to the breakdown of their relations and have not made collaboration plausible.

Finally, the South China Sea has had and appeared to have significant consequences for ties between America and China in recent years. China's growing forces, behaviour, and competing interests make America pay more attention to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, America becomes more forceful in the South China Sea, which lets China increase its strength and hostile role. In their perception of the South China Sea, their views and preferences vary. It is tough to see an ending to their antagonistic roles in southern China at this stage. But their ties and tensions in the South China Sea are currently controlled, but their perception gaps are incredibly high and can cause unexpected events.

### **China's Position in the Asia-Pacific Region**

Many analysts claim that China is developing its military, particularly its naval army. China's military expansion is also seen as a significant danger to the US

interests. The result should be a political, not a physical one. The US has no permanent stations in the Philippines, but because of the Mutual Security Arrangement of the two nations, the US forces can protect Philippines if threatened. China's goal is not only to withdraw the US troops or resources from the area or even avoid rotational deployments or co-exercises in the Asia-Pacific but also to limit or eradicate Washington's impact in the region, and preferably, to stop its security treaties. It does not mean that China wants to remove the US from Asian countries completely. It is not a problem for China if America keeps trading, however, China aims to restrict Washington's power to such a degree that it no longer tries or cannot force regional governments to act against China.

### **America's Position in the Asia-Pacific Region**

It is important to review the status and growth of America's military strength in the Asia-Pacific. America has been exciting the so-called militarisation of China in the South China Sea since 2010. Surprisingly, China's military strength has expanded across Northeast Asia, the Western Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. However, the American military force remains the strongest and expands in the Asia-Pacific region. In Donald Trump's government, substantial changes have been made to the US security policy in the Asia-Pacific region. The most noticeable is the change from the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific rebalancing policy to the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific policy focuses not only on military deployment but also on building a regional defence network. These are separate from the structures of the US mutual security relationship during the Cold War. It is the clearest feature of the Indo-Pacific approach. Recently, some analysts have been addressing the advent in Asia-Pacific of large-scale military conflicts between America and China. It does not depend on China, but rather on the US hawks' attitudes towards China, whether the rivalry between both countries in the region would lead to military conflicts. China wishes to live in harmony with other nations, including America, and preserve prosperity in the world.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Asian Rebalance**

In 2009, Obama administration announced that the US has "returned to Asia," through regular visits of senior officials. Increasing American participation in regional mutual meetings culminating in signing and participating in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Treaty. In 2011, the strategic "rebalance to Asia" was based on these earlier steps to reinforce and institutionalise America's contribution to the Asia-Pacific region. Asia's accelerated development and global dynamic have dramatically enlarged the region's economic and political weight, raising its importance to American interests and calling for an increased American

emphasis. Scholars have welcomed this development, lobbying for more significant expenditure and attention by senior US politicians for a long time.<sup>12</sup> At a time of bitter US partisanship, there is a strong, bipartisan consensus on Asia's value. Indeed, partisan criticism has centered largely on whether the government in control does adequate to increase America's involvement in Asia and whether appropriate tools are available for rhetorical interaction.<sup>13</sup> While initial remarks on America's "re-to-Asia" were made by the Bush administration on correcting perceived neglect of the region, senior officials of the Obama administration claimed that the war on terror and US military contributions had created an imbalanced worldwide footprint. The word "rebalancing" against Asia sought to underline the region's high importance in US foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> The rebalance towards Asia also reflected the need to express US global goals following US troop withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan's deployment, thus liberating military and diplomatic capital dedicated to the Middle East in the past decade. The predicted US declines in federal investment and defence budgets have required a consistent statement of policy goals for cuts and redistribution of limited capital. For the American military, this took the form of a plan for defence signed by Obama in 2012, which announced that "we necessarily will rebalance the region of Asia".<sup>15</sup>

The official Chinese reaction has been expressing scepticism and concern at the United States' stated justification for rebalancing Asia, lamenting Washington and Beijing's lack of strategic trust, calling more for respect for the fundamental Chinese interests, stressing the negative results of rebalancing Asian security, and stepping up efforts to stabilise China-America relations, particularly by developing a new type of strong power relationship with Washington. While there is considerable uncertainty about the impact of the US rebalancing on China's interests, the critical component of China's response was possibly increased efforts to establish a secure relationship with Washington. China has not changed its priorities, stretched its territorial claims, or taken a more assertive approach in the face of territorial maritime disputes. Instead, other nations have stepped up their efforts to contest China's long-defined territorial claims, strengthened by active or passive American support, pressuring China either to trap the Chinese sovereignty or takes necessary action in response.<sup>16</sup> Chinese politicians, intellectuals, and military officers emphasise that China's political climate has shifted and that Chinese people, particularly nationalists, advocate a hard line in sovereignty disputes. Furthermore, Chinese authorities stated that China had not taken any steps that violate legal navigational liberty. It remains unaffected by its policies to settle territorial disputes through peaceful dialogue and its readiness to set aside jurisdiction and exploit resources jointly in controversial areas. Chinese authorities demand a bilateral settlement of sovereignty issues and have advised America not to intervene or stand

by them. Regional tensions are reportedly focused on China's maritime territorial clashes in East China and South China Sea. The US does not take a stand on the issue of the ultimate jurisdiction of the numerous contested islands and other land formations as far as strategy is concerned. Japan's administrative jurisdiction over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands has been acknowledged by the US authorities and consistently confirmed that the Japan-America protection treaty protects the islands. According to the global law concerned, the US officials highlighted the importance of resolving conflicts according to negotiated conflict resolution standards. American officials have endorsed ASEAN attempts to negotiate for the South China Sea a binding code of ethics and encouraged China to deal with tensions through bilateral means. However, China, American allies, and area partners are likely to accelerate efforts to develop their military forces which would intensify the political uncertainty in the region.

### **China, US and UNCLOS**

There is a different perception in the South China Sea between America and China. It is important to understand how this perception difference establishes a degree of distrust between them, which is a hurdle to their cooperation. The territorial and judicial disputes between countries in the area generated a degree of anxiety and distrust. The South China Sea, a route between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, constitutes a strategic position with various consequences for America and China. As stated earlier, China's undeniable sovereignty has a nine-dash demarcation line at its foundation, which does not have territorial sea geographical cooperation. The historical and legal facts remain at the core of Chinese arguments, as suggested in the 2011 by People's Republic of China (PRC) Permanent Mission: "Chinese autonomy and related jurisdiction and rights in the South China Sea are underpinned by ample legal and historical proof".<sup>17</sup> As regards their historical rights and their importance, debates are under way and opinions split, whereby analysts consider the historical rights of China to be narrative and historical manufacture, while others contend that: "China has been the first country to develop, name, discover and conduct economic activities and to exert its jurisdiction over the Nansha Islands".<sup>18</sup> However, the law system applicable to the determination of maritime claims is the UNCLOS, 1982. Compared to China, which authorized UNCLOS in 1996, the US is not part of this global arrangement. It is of particular interest to illustrate and address these UNCLOS clauses.

China's allegations on the South China Sea may be split into land claims and water claims. Concerning land rights, China's status is clearer and claims jurisdiction over the nine-dash axis features. This recognition stems from the statute on the Contiguous Zone and the Territorial Sea from 1992.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the US has



established three potential interpretations of the Chinese naval claims under the nine-dash line, as well as an appreciation of the degree to which those interpretations are compliant with global law. The three potential meanings include:

- China claims the lines to be the island's jurisdiction and the LOS Convention's naval regions.
- National borderlines.
- So-called ancient marine claims of various forms.

In compliance with the Law of Sea, the first understanding would restrict China's maritime claims to the continental shelf, contiguous territory, and the territorial sea. The maritime frontier starts with China's land, coasts, and mainland features specified by the UNCLOS and has an island's title. However, the islands of the South China Sea jurisdiction are a matter of contention and questions the territorial areas that form the islands. Although China has jurisdiction over some island areas, its maritime areas are subject to maritime boundaries with neighbouring nations. Based on the nine-dash line as China's national frontier, the second understanding does not have a legal basis within the UNCLOS because the coastal border is not unilateral but under an arrangement between neighbouring nations. The third understanding brings Chinese privileges and historical waters into consideration. In this situation, the dilemma is that the South China Sea represents a sea in which multiple countries have rights to the EEZ and inland shelf. As a result, the maritime borders of China intersect with those of other nations. In this respect, UNCLOS does not allow these rights to be determined traditionally by a different state.

China has a very different perspective on the case. China ratified UNCLOS in 1996, but on the grounds of its interests, according to Article 298 of the UNCLOS, China announced in 2006 reaffirming that it would not recognise international competence in the resolution of disputes.<sup>20</sup> In 2013, however, Philippines demanded arbitration and the issue got more complicated. China stressed in a 2014 Position Paper on the South China Sea Arbitration Legal Relations of China initiated by the Philippines that China and the Philippines have agreed to settle their differences through mutual instruments. China has emphasised that the 2006 declaration grants them the freedom to select the conflict resolution process even though the present dispute is an arbitration under UNCLOS. In short, the Position Paper decided that the Tribunal had no authority in this case and that China will not engage and acknowledge or honour the Tribunal's decision.

Contrarily, America's stance is close to the opinion made in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration. In this respect, America is calling on Beijing to

respect global law and not misuse its influence. While America is vocal in South China's conflicts over the sea, several observers doubt America's ability to engage in Southern China as America is not a UNCLOS member. Under this framework, the USA should join UNCLOS to reinforce the organisation, to fully help its partners and allies in the South China Sea region, to establish another control in the relationship with China, and prove to the international community that it is not in favour or against the nation but in favour of global law.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, America has no right to compel China to cooperate with global law and to participate in the conflict over the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The paper assesses the state of ties between America and China in the South China Sea. Many factors that remain before establishing a fruitful and productive relationship between China and America in the South China Sea have been identified. The perception difference between America and China has already developed a degree of mistrust, which plays a crucial role in their strained relations. On one hand, the US claims that China has no legal rights in the whole region, while on the contrary, China notes that UNCLOS does not have authority over the South China Sea conflicts. Resolution of such disputes is possible through mutual talks between the parties participating in the disputes. In addition, China has already stressed that America has no right to intervene in the South China Sea disputes, also accusing the US of hypocrisy over its position in these disputes. Therefore, these negative views are an obstacle to establishing the South China Sea of a positive partnership between America and China. The paper indicates that competing preferences are prominent in the South China Sea over shared interests. China's ability to strengthen its position in the area poses a big difference, while America wishes to uphold the existing status quo. This disparity is another hurdle to establishing reciprocal confidence and constructive commitments in the South China Sea between America and China. Both nations are more inclined to bend their muscles in the South China Sea rather than stepping back. At this point, China wants to retain what it has won, thus keeping anyone from controlling any other territory in the nine-dash region. At the same moment, America is relaxed as Chinese rule on the South China Sea has not been materialised. In these situations, the current study found it hard to see the prospects for Chinese-US collaboration in the South China Sea.

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