



China's Policy in the South China Sea, 1990–2010

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Abstract. China's policy regarding the South China Sea has been characterized by strategic ambiguity, manifested at times in a conciliatory approach and at other times in the brandishing of force, with the aim of undermining bilateral relations between the littoral states on the one hand and competing with them on the other, and with the aim of building bilateral alliances with other states bordering the South China Sea. The aim of this policy is to ward off foreign interference, specifically US intervention in the conflict and competition over this region; yet, at the same time, Chinese leaders are conducting assertive activities in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. In this context, the study explores the history of China's policies in the South China Sea. Furthermore, whilst there is a general understanding of the external motivations and internal drivers behind China's policy towards the South China Sea, these factors are often analyzed and examined in isolation. In this research, we will address both factors simultaneously and draw conclusions regarding the likelihood of armed conflict in the region, particularly with regard to the claimant coastal states and the centrality of the US role.

1. Introduction

China is an emerging global power, with an economy ranked second only to that of the United States of America. As for the geographical location of the South China Sea, China has a coastline stretching 14,500 km, extending from the Bohai Sea in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. The countries bordering the sea are China – the subject of our research – as well as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. Consequently, the sea holds immense geopolitical and geo-economic significance. It controls the international shipping routes leading to China and thus serves as China's lifeline and economic breathing space for international trade, not

to mention the economic importance of the sea's untapped natural resources on the one hand, and its as yet undiscovered riches on the other. Consequently, all the states bordering the sea are attempting to assert their dominance over it and control as much of its area as possible, which has turned the sea into a zone of conflict, particularly between China – with its military might and rising economy – and the other states bordering it. The sea has thus become a disputed area, with tensions dating back to the mid-twentieth century, when China's policies towards the sea began to reflect a drive to assert hegemony and control over it.

First: The Importance of the China Sea

The South China Sea is the maritime region situated between latitudes 3° south and 23.27° north, and longitudes 122.10° east and 99.10° west, with a total area of approximately 3.5 million km².

The South China Sea is of great political, economic and military importance to China. The South China Sea is linked to China's living space and its long-term development. It is also vital to China's security. Between 1840 and 1949, Japan, Britain, France, Russia, Germany and other countries invaded China more than 470 times by sea, including 84 large-scale invasions (Jerome, 2011, p. 3).

By controlling the South China Sea, China is able to increase its strategic defensive depth by 500–600 nautical miles and gain a privileged position from which to contain and control its adversaries. The China Sea also represents a key chokepoint for maritime transport; from an economic perspective, some American scholars believe that the economic dependence of China, Japan and South Korea on the

South China Sea route amounts to 85–90 per cent. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990, p. 40)

Furthermore, the South China Sea is a treasure trove of resources, including coastal territories, ports, oil and gas, marine life, minerals, seawater, marine energy, tourism and other resources yet to be discovered (Zou Keyuan, 2005, p. 70).

Secondly: The South China Sea in the 20th Century

Prior to the 1930s, the Parcel and Spratly Islands were under the jurisdiction and control of successive Chinese governments. On 25 July 1933, France occupied nine islands of the Spratly Archipelago, and on 3 July 1938, it occupied the Parcel Islands. (Qichen, 1955)

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Japan had occupied the main islands in the South China Sea and established naval bases there. After the Second World War and until the end of the Cold War, in accordance with international agreements such as the ‘Treaty of San Francisco with Japan’, the ‘Japan–Taiwan Agreement’ and the ‘Potsdam Declaration’, Japan recognized that the islands in the South China Sea belonged to China, as was the case in 1972. (Edward Wong, 2010, p. 2)

In 1968, studies revealed that the South China Sea contained the largest reserves of oil and natural gas fields, and in 1982 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was adopted. Under that Convention, those islands came under Philippine control, which included, amongst others, islands belonging to Taiwan and others that came under Vietnamese control. This is where the historical area of conflict between China and the states bordering the South China Sea originated, and China began to lay claim to those islands through the United Nations, particularly as those states began investing and contracting with more than 200 companies from over 30 countries, including the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada, and drilled more than 1,000 oil wells within a disputed area over which China claims sovereignty. (Swaine, 2011, p. 3)

Furthermore, these states have begun to increase their military spending, particularly on their navies, whilst entering into agreements and alliances with major powers—notably the United States of America—and threatening to escalate the issue at the United Nations and the UN Security Council in order to counter China’s claims to those islands. (Ramsey al-Rikabi, 2011)

Following the end of the Cold War, Japan aligned itself with US policy and became involved in the South China Sea. This was for strategic purposes that coincided with those of the United States, such as containing China, safeguarding the security of maritime corridors in the South China Sea, and protecting its substantial economic interests in the region. However, Japan also has its own agenda, which focuses primarily on joining the club of economic powers (Jerome, 2011, p. 25).

Thirdly: Clashes with the interests of the great powers

China’s claims to sovereignty over the waters of the South China Sea have contributed to the escalation of the dispute and conflict, transforming it from a regional conflict into an international one, due to the international interests at stake, particularly those of the United States of America, which holds substantial commercial assets and investments in the region. It has also used the South China Sea issue as a means of exerting pressure on China, with a view to containing it and curbing its growing influence. (Thayer, 2011, p. 3)

On 16 August 2004, US President George W. Bush announced that he would complete the refurbishment and construction of 20 US military bases in the region, and the United States began shifting its strategic focus from Europe to Asia in general and the South China Sea in particular. The United States also provided support to both Japan and India – which represent China’s traditional and historical adversaries – in order to jointly contain China. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

The United States has sought to cooperate with countries bordering the South China Sea with a view to collectively encircling China, ensuring a US military presence on the front lines, building bilateral alliances with those countries, strengthening multilateral security and regional mechanisms, and providing military aid to countries historically hostile to China, such as India and Japan. (Swaine, 2011)

Fourth: The South China Sea in the Post-Cold War Era

Following the Cold War, India adopted a ‘Look East’ policy to achieve its goal of becoming a superpower. A former Indian Defense Minister stated: “India’s interests extend from the South China Sea in the east to the Arabian Sea in the west; therefore, India has prioritized the development of its naval fleet and has continued to strengthen its capacity for long-range naval operations. India joined the ASEAN Regional

Forum (ARF) in 1996, a multilateral security arrangement in the Asia-Pacific region, and signed military cooperation agreements with countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. India actively cooperates with the United States and Japan in its operations in the South China Sea (Huaqing, 2004, p. 538).

Examples include siding with the United States in the mid-air collision between Chinese and US aircraft; supporting the US-led war on terror; and exchanging intelligence with the United States and Japan.

The United States has also conducted joint military exercises with its allied countries in the region, whilst both Russia and Australia have become involved in the Chinese dispute over the South China Sea. Since the 1990s, Russia has sold aircraft that were state-of-the-art at the time, such as the MiG-29 and Su-27, as well as missiles and warships, to these countries. It has also participated in investments in the resources of the South China Sea, whilst Australia focuses its role on security and intelligence, aiming to safeguard security in the South China Sea region as well as conducting numerous joint military exercises with countries in the region. (Huaqing, 2004, p. 538).

Fifth: The Impact of Foreign Interventions in the South China Sea on China

Intervention by major powers from outside the region poses a potential threat to the Chinese economy and national security, as their intervention not only causes China to lose its deep-water strategic maritime defense barrier extending 500 to 600 nautical miles from the mainland in southern China, and to lose control of the sea lanes in the South China Sea that enable it to deter rivals, but also, due to the tightening of the 'chain of islands', China's energy import routes, foreign trade transport, and naval movements in and out of the region come under surveillance, and China is unable to make full and effective use of the maritime and other economic resources in the South China Sea. (Thayer, 2011)

Furthermore, the intervention of major powers from outside the region poses a significant obstacle to China in its dealings with its immediate neighbors and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The significant influence of the United States and Japan on the development of ASEAN countries has become a 'bargaining chip' that affects ASEAN's domestic and foreign policies; the support provided by the United States and Japan to certain countries enables them to 'act without fear'. In short, China will remain in an unfavorable position on the South China

Sea issue, in that it 'cannot fight, cannot reach an agreement, and cannot postpone the matter'.

The United States has also sought to create the 'Chinese threat' narrative in order to blackmail countries in the region into purchasing various weapons and defense systems, as well as granting the United States permission to establish naval and air bases on their territory, with the resulting trade concessions for US companies and their goods. The United States has also sought to support Japan's return as a significant military power in the region and to maintain the status quo regarding the Taiwan issue. Furthermore, the United States has utilized economic leverage to put pressure on China by closing the US and Japanese markets to Chinese goods through the imposition of higher customs tariffs on them. (Thayer, 2011)

Sixth: China's stance towards ASEAN and the United States

During the tenure of Chinese President Jiang Zemin, China pursued peaceful means and avoided military escalation in its efforts to reclaim the islands in the South China Sea, consistently adopting a policy of peaceful diplomacy. This is particularly so given that economic relations between China and ASEAN are extremely close; trade between China and ASEAN amounted to approximately US\$8 billion in 1991, US\$130.4 billion in 2005, US\$160.8 billion in 2006, and US\$202.5 billion in 2007. In 2010, the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area led to the formation of a vast regional market comprising 1.7 billion consumers, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of nearly US\$2 trillion and a total trade volume equivalent to US\$1.2 trillion. These enormous economic interests compel the Chinese government to proceed with caution when considering how to deal with the South China Sea dispute. (Zou Keyuan, 2005)

VII. China's Diplomatic Efforts with ASEAN

China and ASEAN have established relations based on trust and cooperation. In 1991, China resumed diplomatic relations with all ASEAN member states, and since then has participated in the talks held amongst those states, holding a total of 17 sessions up to 2007. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

In July 1992, when the Chinese Foreign Minister attended the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, he proposed that 'we must move beyond disputes and pursue common development'. Following the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the

Law of the Sea in August 1995, the Chinese Foreign Minister proposed at the second meeting of the African Maritime Assembly that “China is prepared to settle relevant disputes through peaceful negotiations with the states concerned in accordance with generally accepted international law and modern maritime law, including the fundamental principles and legal framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.” In November 2002, China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security Areas. (Qichen, 1955)

In 1996 and 1997, the (10+1) and (10+3) mechanisms were established for ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea respectively. In 2002, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN was signed, and it was decided to establish the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area in 2010. (Huaqing, 2004)

In 2003, China and ASEAN signed a joint declaration announcing the establishment of a ‘Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity’. At the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit held in early October of the same year, the Chinese Prime Minister delivered a speech entitled ‘China’s Development and the Revival of Asia’, in which he outlined policy proposals relating to ‘good-neighborliness’, ‘secure neighborhoods’ and ‘prosperous neighbors’. He then attended the signing ceremony for China’s accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia on 8 October. In 2004, China and ASEAN signed an agreement on trade in goods, an agreement on a dispute settlement mechanism, and a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of transport; and in early 2007, an agreement on trade in services was signed. (Edward Wong, 2010)

Eighth: The People’s Republic of China’s Policy towards Vietnam

Since its founding in 1949, China has established relations based on trust and cooperation with its neighboring countries, in its relations with Vietnam, China provided support during the war against the United States in the 1960s and made an effective contribution to the reunification of Vietnam, despite the Vietnamese position on the Xisha Islands, which are under Vietnamese sovereignty but over which China claims sovereignty. (Zou Keyuan, 2005)

However, China remains committed to reconciliation with Vietnam, as demonstrated by President Jiang Zemin’s visit to Vietnam in November 1994 following

his attendance at the APEC (APEC) – the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, founded in 1989 to promote free trade and economic growth in the region and comprising 21 members – where the two sides agreed to establish a joint working group to resolve disputes between the two countries. In 2000, China and Vietnam issued a joint statement stipulating that they would ‘continue to maintain the existing mechanism for negotiating maritime issues. Pending the resolution of these issues, maritime policies are implemented in the spirit of ‘starting with the easy issues and moving on to the difficult ones’ (Huaqing, 2004).

China has also cooperated with Vietnam in the fields of environmental protection and meteorology, with the aim of mitigating and preventing natural disasters; China and Vietnam have also signed an agreement demarcating the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of both countries in the South China Sea and the continental shelf of the Beibu Gulf, as well as an agreement on cooperation in the field of fisheries in the Beibu Gulf, during Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s term in 2000. The agreement came into force in 2004, following ratification by the Vietnamese National Assembly and the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China. (Thayer, 2011)

Ninth: The Republic of China’s Policy towards Malaysia

Malaysia’s sovereignty claims over the Spratly Islands began in February 1992, bringing it into the dispute over sovereignty of those islands with Taiwan, the Philippines and Brunei, and Vietnam, particularly after China declared its sovereignty over them, which provoked the ire of the aforementioned states. However, during Jiang Zemin’s tenure, China managed to reach an agreement with Malaysia through bilateral consultations, culminating in May 1999 with a joint declaration by the two states to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

Tenth: China’s Position and Perspective on the South China Sea.

Major non-regional powers are paying attention to their interests in the South China Sea. In 2004, China reaffirmed its ‘peaceful China’ ideology, stating that China’s peaceful rise cannot take place without the world, and that China’s rise will not harm anyone, will not threaten anyone, and will not sacrifice anyone. China does not seek hegemony, either now or in the future. China has also pointed out that non-regional states have interests in the South China Sea; for

instance, the United States and Japan have interests in the region, and we must pay close attention to this. This includes ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea; the United States, Japan and others wish to maintain stability in the South China Sea in order to safeguard their political and economic interests, and China shares this desire and these interests.

Conclusion:

Between 1990 and 2010, China's policy in the South China Sea underwent a notable evolution, reflecting a gradual shift from a phase focused on confidence-building and regional cooperation to one of more assertive promotion of its sovereignty claims, whilst maintaining a strategy of postponing the resolution of substantive disputes.

In the 1990s, China enacted the Law on Territorial Waters and Adjacent Areas in 1992, which affirmed its historical claims to most of the South China Sea based on the Nine-Dash Line; this included the occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995, which sparked tensions with the Philippines and other countries.

Despite these bold moves, Beijing simultaneously sought to improve its relations with ASEAN countries, particularly after the end of the Cold War, through multilateral dialogue and confidence-building measures.

This policy reached a relative high point with the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, in which China and the ASEAN countries committed to peaceful resolution and the avoidance of the use of force, alongside limited joint exploration agreements.

However, the period 2007–2010 began to see a shift towards a more assertive approach, as China increased the pressure on foreign oil companies, took steps to strengthen its administrative and military control, and declared (particularly around 2010) that the South China Sea was a core interest of its own.

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