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POLICYMAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

THEORY AND PRAXIS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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CHINA'S HEGEMONY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is poised to be the next big geopolitical theatre. It is one of the busiest and most important maritime routes for global trade, commerce and energy supply. The freedom of navigation is therefore at the centre of attention. The sea is dotted by many atolls, cays, islands, reefs, sandbars and shoals, so situated that all littoral countries claim the region as their own. This paper reviews the claims and counterclaims to the area, assesses the energy reserves that allegedly sit beneath it and analyses its significance as a maritime crossroads. The main argument of the paper is that, although the South China Sea is important from the point of view of trade, fishing and energy reserves, China's strategic concerns trump them all.

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INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is fast becoming a theatre of brinkmanship. The major regional actors are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei and their actions are guided by narrow national interests. Although they invoke long-term regional stability as a guiding variable, in reality their goals are nothing but self-promotion. Therefore, the talk of virtues of freedom (of navigation), equality (of access), mutual respect (of sovereignty) and peaceful settlement (of disputes) makes little sense. The fight is not as much for upholding the virtues of freedom of navigation or the



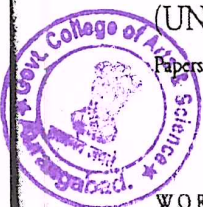
peaceful settlement of maritime disputes as claimed by the parties concerned but rather about reclaiming many floating as well as submerged islands in the South China Sea.

All the concerned parties want to preserve what is currently under their control and vie for more. The status quo suits some, while others seek reconfiguration. The imperative is an ingredient called power, which is the currency to marginalise alternative voices and privilege suitable ones. The power ingredients—economic, ideational, military or political—shape the manoeuvrings of the parties. China, the most powerful littoral claimant is playing its cards well, while others are struggling to make their voices heard. Given Beijing's power position relative to other claimants, it has little respect for alternative perspectives. The main argument of this paper is that although the area is important from the trade, commerce and energy point of view, China's strategic concerns trump them all. The first section of the paper illuminates the claims and counterclaims of littoral countries and the second assesses the energy reserves in the disputed zone. The third section analyses the significance of the area as a maritime crossroads while the fourth presents the main argument.

CLAIMS AND COUNTERCLAIMS

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At least, six littoral countries—China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei—claim all, some or a few of the islands in the South China Sea. The claims and counterclaims are based on several factors ranging from history to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (Jon Lunn and Arabella Lang, *The South China Sea Dispute*, House of Commons London Briefing Papers, July 2016, online at <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk>) China's claim (the Nine-Dash



Line) rests on a combination of factors. (*Understanding China's Position on the South China Sea Disputes*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, 2016, online at <http://isp.gov.se>) The first is historical and according to Beijing, the Paracel and Spratly Islands had been under the jurisdiction of different Chinese dynasties for over two thousand years and the UNCLOS does not really matter. The second factor is economic as according to several reliable accounts, the islands in the South China Sea contain large energy reserves. China being the world's largest importer of fossil fuels views them as potential sources of energy. The third factor is the maritime transit as the South China Sea is one of the world's busiest maritime crossroads and regional economies like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan receive most of their imports through it. Similarly, almost all Chinese imports traverse the same route. Beijing therefore wishes to control if not all then at least the major island strings. The final factor is strategic as China is now the second largest world economy. It is probably the only meaningful rival to the power, influence and stature of the United States of America (US), the world's lone superpower. Slowly but surely, Beijing has been securing its lands, skies and seas to expand its strategic influence and the South China Sea is part of that expansion.

Vietnam's claim to almost all the islands of the South China Sea is based on history, effective occupation and security. (Cady A Thayer, *Vietnam's Strategies in the South China Sea*, East Asia Forum, 2017, online at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org>) Like China, Vietnam cites historical links to the islands of the area and argues that it has been ruling over them—the Paracels and the Spratlys in particular—since the seventeenth century. Hanoi also put forth the effective occupation or sovereignty factor. Effective occupation is a precedent stipulated by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, defined by “an ability and intention to exercise continuous and uninterrupted jurisdiction”. According to this stipulation, the Paracel and Spratly Islands are Vietnam's territories and had been under its direct jurisdiction until the Chinese forcefully occupied them. Vietnam also believes that the sovereignty of a coastal state (such as itself) lawfully extends to the adjacent belt of sea referred to as the territorial sea and this applies to all the islands in the South China Sea. Finally, Hanoi argues that its national security would be compromised if the islands were militarised by any other state in general and China in particular. Similarly, it sees the sea's resources (oil, gas and fisheries) as essential for national development. Cumulatively speaking, Vietnam has a major claim over the islands in the South China Sea that cannot be dismissed as frivolous. Its case is as solid as that of



China's, if not more.

The Philippines lays claim to some islands in the South China Sea based on geographical proximity and its argument though simple is forceful. (Mark E. Rosen, *Philippine Claims in the South China Sea: A Legal Analysis*, CNA Corporation, Arlington, 2014, online at <https://www.cna.org>) As an archipelagic state, its jurisdiction extends to the adjacent belt of sea, which includes the Spratly Islands. The Philippines also claims the Scarborough Shoal on similar grounds. While Indonesia is not a part of the dispute over the South China Sea, it claims the Natuna Islands and the surrounding waters.

(Aaron L. Connelly, *Indonesia in the South China Sea: Going it Alone*, Lowy Institute, Sydney, 2016, online at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org>)

The Chinese Nine-Dash Line includes the Natuna waters, which Indonesia considers farfetched. Jakarta calls the Natuna Islands and the waters surrounding them as the Natuna Sea. Malaysia and Brunei claim some islands of the South China Sea saying they fall within their exclusive economic zones as stipulated by UNCLOS. (J. Ashley Roach, *Malaysia and Brunei: An Analysis of their Claims in the South China Sea*, CNA Corporation, Arlington, 2014, online at <https://www.cna.org>) The Malaysian government also claims a dozen or so

Spratly Islands, which contain deposits of gas, oil as well as fisheries. Brunei, a silent stakeholder in the South China Sea, claims a rectangular chunk of the disputed area. Maritime features such as Bombay Castle, Louisa Reef, Owen Shoal and Rifleman Bank fall within Brunei's exclusive economic zone, which lies upon its continental shelf. Succinctly, the South China Sea has numerous atolls, cays, islands, reefs, sandbars and shoals and six major littoral countries claim all, some or a few of them. The moot point is that their claims overlap and the overlapping claims and counterclaims are the main sources of tension in the area. All the claimants however appear to have some valid proof to back their claims.

According to the USEIA, the South China Sea contains approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 tcf of natural gas reserves. The USGS estimates that yet-to-be explored areas of the sea contain between five and 22 billion barrels of oil and between 70 and 290 tcf of gas. The area is believed to have an abundance of fish with at least 3,365 known species of marine life and roughly 12 per cent of the world's total fishing catch worth US \$21.8 billion.



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THE ENERGY ESTIMATES

It is difficult to assess the energy reserves in the South China Sea due to extensive geological, political and technological factors. Nonetheless, there are several estimates about the type, quantity and quality of reserves in the area. The resources may be dubbed as proven and provable. According to the United States Energy Information Administration (USEIA), (*South China Sea Overview*, 2013, online at <https://www.eia.gov>) the South China Sea contains approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas reserves. Another entity, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) (*World Petroleum Resources Assessment Project*, 2010, online at <https://www.usgs.gov>) estimates that yet-to-be explored areas of the sea contain between five and 22 billion barrels of oil and between 70 and 290 tcf of gas. The China National Offshore Oil Corporation estimates that the yet-to-be explored part of the South China Sea holds approximately 125 billion barrels of oil and 500 tcf of natural gas. The estimates for the disputed areas are also revealing. USEIA (*ibid*) estimates that although the Spratly region contains virtually no proven or provable reserves it does contain significant deposits of hydrocarbons. The USGS (*ibid*) believes that the Spratly area holds between 0.8 and 5.4 billion barrels of oil and between 7.6 and 55.1 tcf of natural gas as undiscovered resources. As to the Paracels, the USEIA (*ibid*) believes they do not have significant discovered conventional oil and gas fields and thus no proven or provable reserves. In this connection, it is important to mention that the littoral countries are vying more for the Spratly and Paracel Islands than any other island.

The littoral countries are also eyeing the fish reserves of the South China Sea. (Marina Tsirbas, *Saving the South China Sea Fishery: Time to Internationalise*, National Security College, Australian National University, Canberra, 2017, online at <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au>) The area is believed to have an abundance of fish with at least 3,365 known species of marine life and roughly 12 per cent of the world's total fishing catch worth US \$21.8 billion. The fish reserves/fisheries are extremely important for the littoral countries for several reasons. First, these states are among the most reliant on fish as sources of nutrients and fisheries are viewed as imperative for reducing malnutrition among their populations. Second, the fisheries provide employment to about 3.7 million people excluding unreported and illegal fishing. This is perhaps the most immediate and interesting feature of the South China Sea which receives little attention from academics, the media or even policy analysts. Third, 55 per cent of global maritime fishing



vessels operate in the South China Sea and fish stocks consequently are on the decline. No littoral country can evade responsibility for this unfolding maritime tragedy—the number of fish caught each hour has declined by a third. Last, the fisheries—a living resource—are worth more than money and are fundamental to the food security of the coastal populations numbering hundreds of millions. The fish are as important as oil or natural gas, if not more, for all littoral countries and are a critical part of the dispute in the South China Sea.

THE MARITIME (TRADE) ROUTE

The South China Sea hosts some of the most important trade routes in the world. (Zewei Yang, "The Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: An Ideal or a Reality", *Beijing Law Review*, vol3, no3, 2012, pp137-44) Almost a third of global crude oil and over half of global liquefied natural gas (LNG) passes through it. The Strait of Malacca, a narrow maritime enclave adjacent to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, is a bottleneck through which nearly half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage passes with the majority continuing onto the South China Sea. As per estimates of Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, nearly 94,000 vessels passed through the Malacca Strait in 2004 out of 607,000 global ocean going vessel movements. In 2010, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (*Review of Maritime Transport*, 2010, online at <https://unctad.org>) estimated that 4.8 billion tonnes or nearly half of the world's maritime trade passed through the strait.

In addition, the USEIA (*ibid*) has stated that a large share of oil from the Persian Gulf and Africa passes through the South China Sea. To be more specific, about 14 million barrels of crude oil or almost a third of global oil shipments passes



through the sea each day. Of this, over 90 per cent flows through the Strait of Malacca, while the remaining 10 per cent comes from the intra-Southeast Asian regional trade zone. In 2011, about 15.2 million barrels per day of oil crossed the strait. A large proportion of it is processed at terminals in Malaysia and Singapore and then shipped out again through the South China Sea to China, Japan and South Korea. Moreover, crude oil also flows into the disputed zone from surrounding countries such as Malaysia (0.4), Indonesia (0.3) and Australia (0.2). In 2011, around six tcf of LNG or over half of global LNG passed through it. About 56 per cent of this volume was imported by China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Qatar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia together account for almost 75 per cent of all LNG exports to the region. Given the dependence of regional economies on energy imports and the South China Sea maritime route as the only viable option, the volumes of vessels with oil and gas will continue to increase. China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan also use this maritime highway to export their finished products to the rest of the world—including to Asia, Europe and North America. Thus, the South China Sea maritime route is a lifeline for regional economies and disruptions therein could throw them off balance and jeopardise the world economy as well.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS

China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea flows from a combination of factors—economic, political and geostrategic. The latter factor however trumps all others.

The Economic Factor

While economics largely explains China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, it does not go far enough. The Chinese economy has been experiencing rapid growth since the beginning of market reforms in 1978. The gross domestic product (GDP) grew nearly 10 per cent a year on average, a historical record. As a result, the country has been able to lift about 800 million people out of poverty. Although the GDP growth has slowed down since 2012,



patrols and questioning UNCLOS's jurisdiction, while huge investments in littoral countries and unconditional offers of developmental aid demonstrate its resolve to protect core national interests. Strategic concerns and not merely economic necessities influence Beijing's moves in the South China Sea. Thus, while the economic factor is indeed important, strategic concerns seem the most momentous.

The Political Factor

Likewise, the political factor is also crucial for China's growing assertiveness. This has three subsets with the first being nationalism which has been rising and shows little signs of dissipating. (Lijun Yang and Chee Kia Lim, *Three Waves of Nationalism in Contemporary China: Sources, Themes, Presentations and Consequences*, East Asia Institute, Singapore, 2010, online at <http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg>) This is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon and many Afro-Asian and Latin American countries are also reeling under extreme nationalistic tendencies these days. Chinese nationalism however seems more nuanced, due to certain intrinsic peculiarities such as enormous size, deep sense of humiliation at the hands of smaller neighbours (imperial Japan), unmatched ancient cultural accomplishments and a vibrant development paradigm. The cumulative effect of these apparently disjointed factors is a far stronger and smarter nation. Thus, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is a reflection of its newfound strength—economic, military, political, social and technological. The second political subset is the on-going project of territorial integration, which the Chinese embarked upon as soon as the communist regime took charge in 1949. The project initially included the renegade territories of Taiwan and Tibet but now includes the islands of the South China Sea as well. Although China has had some cultural, economic and historical connections with the islands, its claim today is expressly political.

The third political subset is bureaucratic, which connotes the administrative apparatus's entrenched interests. The bureaucracy generally comprises career administrators, the military brass, professional managers and technocrats as well as retired government and communist party officials. These actors boast professional networks and offer policy advice. In addition, via the mass media, they disseminate favoured prescriptions and try to influence policy discussions.



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Over time, the bureaucracies handling spheres such as economic, home and security affairs, position themselves as credible policy analysts, study centres or think-tanks. This phenomenon again is not unique to China and is true of such systems all over the world even within the parliamentary and presidential forms of government. Bureaucracies penetrate governing structures to lobby for particular policy options. Strictly speaking this is not illegal or undemocratic as long as lobbyists play by the rulebook and are transparent about it. The problem however arises when lobbyists (encouraged by entrenched elements) promote or push for options, which affect or are likely to affect national interests adversely in the long run. The Chinese bureaucracy is no different and reportedly enjoys profound influence over policymaking systems, especially in the defence, economic and foreign policy domains.

China has concluded or is close to concluding agreements for establishing military bases with Brunei in the east, Cambodia in the south, Pakistan in the west and other willing partners in between like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In short, it is on a spree of military expansion across Asia to rival American influence. Although Beijing refutes reports of military expansion in the region that is precisely what it is up to.

The dominant narrative surrounding the islands of the South China Sea is also deeply influenced by this factor. (Susan V Lawrence and Michael F Martin, *Understanding China's Political System*, Congressional Research Service, Washington DC, 2012, online at <https://fas.org>)

In short, the political factor with its rather domestic distinctions—nationalism, political expediency and entrenched bureaucracy—is a significant ingredient. However, it only partly explains China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. The geostrategic factor is probably the most important of all.

The Geostrategic Factor

The geostrategic factor connotes identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and the means to achieve them. It invariably also relates to gaining military advantage for the long haul. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is more about securing long-term gains, although economic and



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political gains are also worth pursuing and are important for security. Strategic calculations are always invasive. While the strategic variable has several interesting aspects, this paper considers only the three most relevant ones—the presently on-going military encirclement of China, its yet-to-be realised full territorial integration and a favourable balance of power in the Pacific. Beijing primarily desires the latter in the Asia-Pacific and considers it essential for national security. The only serious challenge to securing this region is the presence of the US military and China wants to reduce American influence by all possible means. One indispensable method from the Chinese perspective includes securing the South China Sea.

Beijing appears to be relying on three main strategies to curtail US influence in the Pacific—investment, expansion and intimidation. China has been investing huge capital in the countries of the Asia-Pacific in an effort to bind them in a complex but gainful dependence. No Pacific country, including Japan, Singapore or South Korea, the closest US allies, has been able to escape the process of regional economic integration spearheaded by China. ("One Belt One Road: An Economic Roadmap", *The Economist*, September 2016, online at <https://www.eiu.com>) Investment seems to be its most potent instrument for buying loyalty. Likewise, Beijing has made determined efforts to develop new platforms for establishing military bases in not only the Pacific but also across Asia. The South China Sea appears to be the current area of attention. China has concluded or is close to concluding agreements for establishing military bases with Brunei in the east, Cambodia in the south, Pakistan in the west and other willing partners in between like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In short, it is on a spree of military expansion across Asia to rival American influence. Although Beijing refutes reports of military expansion in the region that is precisely what it is up to.

China has been also using intimidation as a tactic against reluctant regional states such as Bhutan, Indonesia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The intimidating tactics so far have been relatively moderate in the form of punitive official statements, diplomatic censure, temporary halt of development aid/loans, withholding supply of agreed items or equipment, downsizing planned official visits, etc. However, the mild and seemingly ad-hoc tactics could become hard and permanent if Beijing so chooses. All the efforts in the form of investment, expansion or intimidation are designed to turn the balance of power in China's favour. This will be not only slow and frustrating but also



challenging and dangerous. The fact however remains that the Chinese need to turn the balance of power in their favour if they are to attain security in the region.

Another auxiliary issue influencing China's behaviour is the inconclusive or as yet-to-be completed process of territorial integration and the potential impediments to it. All Chinese leaders since political independence in 1949 have invariably pursued the process of territorial integration. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and the islands of the South China Sea are considered the key elements of the integration project. While Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang are already part of the mainland, Taiwan and the islands of South China Sea remain to be absorbed. Beijing has made it plain that both are integral parts of its territory and if deemed necessary it would use force to win them back. Their inclusion is considered non-negotiable, as it is a critical element of national security, economic growth and resurrection of the glorious imperial history.

The South China Sea islands and surrounding waters are crucial as potential military platforms, plausible points of strategic surveillance and sites of energy reserves. Conversely, if they remain loosely controlled floating points where any ship or submarine could dock, dig for natural gas or oil and spy upon the coastal areas of littoral countries, they would pose a grave danger to Chinese interests and this cannot be allowed. Moreover, if the US and its allies in the region move in and out without questions being asked, it could be construed as Beijing's weakness. Thus, the South China Sea islands and surrounding waters are too precious to lose.

Finally, the current on-going military encirclement of China is also an important strategic aspect. The rise of China as an economic superpower, military giant and strategic competitor has unsettled a number of regional as well as global players from Japan in the east to the US in the west and scores of

China has avoided confirming characterisations such as being a rival of the US. However, given the sheer scale of its achievements, it is widely believed that it will eventually replace the US as the world's most powerful nation. In addition, the centre of gravity as regards the economy, military, power politics and technology has already shifted to Asia. This is acknowledged as a sure sign of China's primacy in world affairs.



others including India. China has avoided confirming characterisations such as a being a rival of the US. However, given the sheer scale of its achievements, it is widely believed that it will eventually replace the US as the world's most powerful nation. In addition, the centre of gravity as regards the economy, military, power politics and technology has already shifted to Asia. This is acknowledged as a sure sign of China's primacy in world affairs. Even the staunchest critics have acknowledged this fact and are adjusting to the prospects of Beijing's dominance in Asia and elsewhere.

It is in this context that the US's strategic manoeuvres in Asia should be viewed. Washington's policy initiatives are nowhere more revealing than in its efforts at redrawing new strategic partnerships in Asia. The obvious partners are Japan, South Korea and Australia and these are the countries most deeply unsettled, disappointed and worried about China's influence on their national security and on the balance of power in the region. Japan and South Korea host tens of thousands of US military personnel. They have the largest American military bases outside the US homeland, which have been a bone of contention between Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington. The Chinese have always expressed displeasure at the presence of the US military in the Pacific. In the same vein, the US has been trying to win over other countries like Cambodia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. It already conducts joint military exercises with these countries and has been selling huge quantities of weapons to them. The US, Japan, South Korea, Australia and India have conducted extensive joint military exercises in the Indian Ocean and all are deeply sceptical about Beijing's goals. In a nutshell, the US has been slowly but surely militarising Asia and trying to encircle China with alliances in the guise of strategic partnerships.

Viewed from a military perspective, though not formally acknowledged, China is now militarily surrounded by the US from East to West Asia. What is Beijing to do in such a suffocating scenario if not actively seek to build as many outlying platforms as possible to counter the US led provocative encirclement. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere (for example in Central Asia through the Pakistan-Afghanistan corridor) forms part of a balancing strategy and lies at the heart of its claims over the islands in the South China Sea. Other variables such as economic dividends, the maritime route and energy security are secondary to pressing strategic concerns.



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CLOSING REMARKS

The South China Sea and its resource rich waters are extremely important to the concerned parties and all have legitimate claims. The region is one of the busiest maritime hubs in the world and regional economics will be affected adversely if the disputes worsen for whatever reason. All regional countries would therefore like to see the various disputes resolved peacefully. However, China has angrily rejected the claims of other countries to the area by claiming the precedent of historical jurisdiction spanning centuries. Other littorals have put forth similar premises to back their claims. The outside world is also worried about the possible effects of conflicting claims and counterclaims and the continuing unilateral expansion by the Chinese. The most important variable affecting Beijing's behaviour is its long-term strategic security concerns. Other variables such as economic dividends and maritime resources are significant but not central to its interests. China will probably eventually be the hegemon of the South China Sea given its growing influence in the Asia-Pacific and around the world. ■



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