

## **The US-China An Antagonism in the South China Sea**

**\*P.Rama Krishna Reddy, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science  
and Public Administration, S.V University, Tirupati-517502**

**Abstract:**The South China Sea region is considered to be the world's second busiest international sea lane as more than half of the world's super tanker traffic passes through the region's waters. The importance and the significance of this region lie in the fact that it contains abundant oil and gas resources which are strategically located near large energy-consuming countries. The United Nations General Assembly has also been called upon for help by the Philippines in 1999 for assistance in this dispute. During the meeting, China, with the support of Malaysia, stressed that it advocated settlement through peaceful means but opposed intervention from nations outside the region. After analysing the situation in the South China Sea, one can comprehend from the facts that a mere conflict between the countries around the periphery of the sea, has the potential to turn hostile in the coming future if not given ample attention today. The role of the United States would be very vital in resolving the dispute peacefully.

**Key words:** USA, china, South China Sea, Antagonism

### **Introduction**

The South China Sea is now an area of strategic interest for major powers and is on the verge of becoming a highly volatile zone where the Asia-Pacific countries, especially China, are trying to assert their claims over its resource-rich islands that offer both geostrategic and geopolitical value. In the Cold War era, the South China Sea held no strategic interest.<sup>1</sup> However, with the change in the global security environment, the significance attached to this area has undergone major changes. One theory suggests that this change can be understood in three phases, Pre-Modern; Modern; and Post-Modern. In the pre-modern period, territories belonged to no one and were technically considered as abandoned and acquirable-by-appropriation. There were no major disputes over the islands at that point. The modern era, lasting from the European period to the post-Cold War period, was marked by power shifts and increasing disputes. Though the global powers retained control during most of the initial

period, the end of the cold war resulted in a power vacuum in the region. This allowed the East Asian littorals to redefine their sovereignty claims on the South China Sea islands. In the Post-Modern era, the disputes over the territory in the South China Sea are conditioned by shifts in the global landscape and the strategic interest of the claimant states.

Though most of the claims made on the ownership of these islands are based on historical grounds, it is suggested that the geographic and resource implications of this region are the actual driving factors. The South China Sea roughly extends up to 150,000 sq. miles. Its littoral states comprise the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, the Indo-China countries Vietnam and Cambodia, Taiwan and China. It provides a waterway through the choke points of Straits of Taiwan in the north and Straits of Malacca in the south. It consists of three main archipelagos which include the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank, the Scarborough Shoal, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. The importance of this region lies in its commercial and military sea lanes, extensive maritime resource ownership and territorial space. Its diverse ecosystem is a source of food, livelihood and marine trade for most of the claimant states. It is rich in natural resources and has large reserves of oil and natural gas. These littoral states are now involved in a number of conflicts over South China Sea islands. China is the most aggressive claimant and has been accused of pursuing a policy of unilateral action in resolving these conflicts. Though it has now shifted to a more diplomatic approach as a result of its association with ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) member states, it still controls a majority of the claimed territory through economic and military power projection as well as soft power tactics. Some of the disputed cases include multiple parties, and the resultant political scenario bears implications for the maintenance of peace in the surrounding areas. For example, China, Taiwan and Vietnam over Paracel Islands; Taiwan and China over Pratas and Macclesfield Bank; the whole of Spratly Islands are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam and some parts of it are claimed by Brunei, the Philippines and Malaysia; Indonesia and China over the Natuna Islands group; The Philippines, China and Taiwan over the Scarborough Shoal etc. A classic case study in addition to the existing problem can be addressed by adding a new dimension in this issue, that is, India's responses and growing role in the South China Sea. On the one hand, India has been expanding its naval reach from the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea through various naval exercises and, to further project its blue-water capability, the Indian Navy had deployed five of its front-line warships in the South China Sea in the year 2004, also on the other hand India's deepening ties with the littoral states of South China Sea, are a

step forward for India in signalling its capabilities and outreach, especially with Japan and Vietnam. Since 1994, the relations between India and Vietnam have been progressing, becoming an irritant for China and its interests which already has been in conflicting terms with Vietnam over the claims on Paracel and Spratly Islands. In the recent past, China very overtly and assertively warned India's ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) Videsh from going ahead with exploration projects in the South China Sea and clearly showed an intent of using all possible measures, despite its policy of Peaceful Rise,<sup>2</sup> to stop India in its efforts of expanding its co-operation with Vietnam through exploration projects, as it is a violation of China's sovereignty (since the disputed area is claimed by China to be a part of its territory in all rights). However, India has clearly stated that it would go ahead with its joint exploration plans as it is well within the territory of Vietnam. India also believes in the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and would continue with its exploration efforts. It would be interesting to analyse this latest stand-off between the two Asian giants making the South China Sea a major flashpoint as it becomes an area of Struggle for Supremacy.<sup>3</sup> This dissertation makes a modest attempt in highlighting the fact that the South China Sea will be an area of Struggle for Supremacy among the major powers. The objective of this study will be to highlight the geopolitical and geostrategic importance and implications of the South China Sea; to assess the contemporary debates on the South China Sea in India and China; to highlight the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea; to scrutinise China's enlargement policy in the South China Sea; to highlight Vietnam and China's diverging views and conflicting perspectives; to assess the conflict resolution effort initiatives; to analyse a probable scenario in the region and to recommend ways by which a peaceful resolution can be arrived at.

## **Objectives**

**1.To study the importance of south china sea in the world**

**2. To analysis the USA-China relations on south china sea**

## **China aligned with the US**

Today the South China Sea is considered to be the new geopolitical node. Hence, this is the area where the interest of the major players in International Relations, that is, the US, China and India, intersect each other. Taking China as the common factor, the aim would be to establish the relationship between the other three actors individually with China and bring

in the areas of conflict in the South China Sea among them. Apart from the resources and vital sea lanes, the region is vital for US interests because it has treaty allies in the region, needs to contain China's assertiveness and views the waters as critically strategic. This position, however, infuriates China. The long-standing dispute between China and its South-East Asian neighbours over the control of the sea has suddenly become a new source of tension between the US and China. According to China, its claims are rooted in its history. The year, 2010 witnessed escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, with the United States increasing its presence in the region, followed by a series of confrontations between the US and China over the disputes related to territorial claims. According to some US media outlets, Chinese officials made it clear to the visiting administrative officials of the US that they will not tolerate any interference in the seas. In response to this, Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, said that the disputes were sensitive to regional security and important for leading diplomatic priority.<sup>4</sup>

According to several scholars, China now perceives the peaceful resolution of South China Sea as its Core Interest.<sup>5</sup> The fact remains that the Sea has always been of core interest to China, but was not officially articulated to the World as such until March 2010.<sup>6</sup> The various skirmishes that occurred between China and the other parties to the dispute in the region—be it with Vietnam in the 1970s and the Philippines in the 1990s—have only reinforced this premise.

China and the United States differ over the concept of “freedom of navigation.” The principle of freedom of navigation was developed in international law. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) successfully codifies Article 90 which states that: “Every State, whether coastal or landlocked, has the right to sail ships flying its flag on the high seas.” UNCLOS also states in Article 87 that, “Freedom of the high seas is exercised under the conditions laid down by this convention and by other rules of international law. ...” and that “These freedoms shall be exercised by all states with due regard for the interests of other states in their exercise of the freedom of the high seas.” The United States is backed by India and several other littoral states. During the 17th ARF meeting, Hanoi, Vietnam in July 2010, India joined other countries to openly declare that the South China Sea should remain open for international navigation. The Indian position on the security situation in the South China Sea was made clear by the Indian Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, in her address at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi on July 28, 2011,<sup>7</sup> where she reiterated the region's importance as an important shipping route and India's support for freedom of navigation in sea lanes. However, China holds an alternate

view; it contests the “freedom of navigation” by saying that there are no international waters in the South China Sea and that China should act with strength to repel US interference in the contested area.<sup>8</sup>

A confrontation is looming between China and the United States over Beijing’s claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea in conflict both with US assertions of its right to patrol there and claims from other nations that they, too, have rights in the gas- and oil-rich region. There have been a series of confrontations between the United States and China in the South China Sea. The Chinese government has warned United States oil companies not to engage in joint oil exploration activities with other nations. In the year 2001, a Chinese fighter jet intercepted a US Navy surveillance airplane in international airspace over the South China Sea, causing a midair collision. It resulted in a Chinese pilot’s death which further led to the detention of the 24 American crew members for 11 days after their plane made an emergency landing on Hainan.<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 2009, Chinese vessels came within a few yards of the US Navy Surveillance Ship, “The Impeccable.” China lashed out on the navy ship and blamed it for violating international law by conducting surveillance activities in waters where China claims jurisdiction. According to Chinese officials, the United States had conducted activities in China’s special economic zone in the South China Sea without China’s permission.<sup>10</sup>

The confrontation began when the Chinese vessels surrounded the Impeccable and came within 25 feet of it. The United States report suggests that the Chinese sailors waved flags and ordered it to leave. The crew on the ship told the Chinese vessels that it had the right of safe passage in international waters. But two of the Chinese ships blocked the Impeccable, after it requested safe transit, while Chinese sailors dropped pieces of wood in its path and wielded hooks. During the confrontation, the Impeccable’s crew sprayed some of the Chinese sailors with a fire hose, causing some of the sailors to strip to their underwear.<sup>11</sup> According to Pentagon officials, the Chinese ships consisted of a naval intelligence vessel, two smaller trawlers, a fisheries patrol boat and an official oceanographic ship. Chinese officials have made clear statements that since the United States is not a claimant state to the dispute of the South China Sea, it is better for them to leave the dispute to be sorted out among the claimant states. Chinese vice Foreign Minister, Cui Tiankai’s commented to foreign reporters: “While some American friends may want the United States to help in this matter, we appreciate their gesture but more often than not such gestures will only make things more complicated. If the United States wants to play a role, it may counsel restraint to those countries that have been taking provocative action and ask them to be more responsible

in their behaviour. I believe the individual countries are actually playing with fire and I hope the fire will not be drawn to the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

These recent stand-offs indicate a possible hostile confrontation between the US and Chinese forces. The Chinese are growing wary of US involvement in the South China Sea, especially with the US extending its military presence by sending additional military personnel to Australia in the coming years in Darwin. Also, China has clearly said that it will not bear any international interference in this regional dispute. Although the US has not supported any individual claims of the states, it is pressing upon a multilateral solution based on international maritime laws. The role of the United States in this context in the South China Sea can be further understood by summarising Mark J. Valencia's views in “The South China Sea: Back to the Future?” published in December 2008 by Global Asia (Journal<sup>13</sup> thus: China's growth in naval power can challenge the United States' intention to play a leadership role in Asia, and also its allies. The US considers that its presence in the region is important for peace and stability in the region. They believe that it is their responsibility to be involved in the affairs of virtually every country, so as to fledge democracy and international laws; to keep US companies and trade protected; to secure the important SLOCs, etc. The United States is trying to elevate its relationship with the ASEAN countries, and build defence ties by making them strategic partners. The role played by United States in the region is driven basically by their national and economic interests. They see China as a threat, and hence are trying to ally with other countries to isolate China. The question that arises is whether the United States is trying to counterbalance or contain China, or to protect their economic and strategic interests. Moreover, the rising friction between China and its neighbours in recent times over security issues has provided the United States with an opportunity to assert itself.

### **Conclusion**

China's efforts to modernise its navy are continued, and it has constantly stated that its sovereignty over the South China Sea is indisputable. Similarly, the South- East Asian states who also claim rights over some of the islands in the region, have been unwilling to make concessions with regard to their territorial claims. China's strategy in the South China Sea still remains a mystery. As a result, the situation in the South China Sea is delicate, dynamic, and possibly unpredictable. The situation prevalent in the region today is making all the conflict resolution efforts a failure, leaving a direct impact on the region's security environment, and making peaceful settlement of the dispute far from reality right now. The changing dynamics in this region need to be given importance and have to be observed very

carefully. Any kind of serious confrontation can have implications for peace and stability of the whole region. The United States have to be watchful of China's moves. Basically, any developments in the South China Sea, and the outcome, will have major implications not only for countries in the region but for the world at large, as many nations have considerable economic interests in the region. The dispute is multi fold in the current scenario. The dispute stands between China and ASEAN member states, and between China and the United States. However, in strategic considerations, it would be in China's interests and benefit not to aggravate the situation in the South China Sea as its resource base might not be sufficient for China's energy needs. Escalation tensions could compromise its resource diplomacy and sea-borne trade, which mostly comprises the oil coming from the Persian Gulf, if India and the United States block the straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and interdicting Chinese energy trade through the Northern Indian Ocean. Hence, freezing of the dispute could be more viable option. As for the United States, its presence in the region helps create a stabilising force for all concerned, to help neutralise tensions and not escalate them to serious hostilities.

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