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The South China Sea Dispute: A Complex Tangle of Claims and Hedging of Claimant's States

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Abstract

This paper is based on the argument that the dispute is between China, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the South China Sea (SCS) This study explores the stance of China, Vietnam, and the Philippines to save their national interest over this issue. The paper highlights the answers to the core interest of China in the SCS the stances of Vietnam and the Philippines, and the hedging of all these states. Furthermore, research sheds light on the strategic significance of this region. To find out answers to these questions the research has employed qualitative methodology within the post-positivist paradigm. The basic lens of Strategic Hedging theory has applied during this research. The core finding of this research is that SCS is a complex dispute over the sovereignty of all these claimant states that puts potential threats and security implications for trade routes passing through these disputed waters as well as serious security threats among the claimants in the region.

Key Words: SCS, Philippines, Vietnam, Spratly, Parcel, Strategic Hedging.

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is located at the southwest of the strait of Malacca in the southeast and the northeast extent is the strait of Taiwan. More than 500 million people in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Republic of Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam can reach the facility in less than 100 nautical miles. This region is a special geopolitical and

economic importer since it is involved in the supply and transit of oil, LNG, and coal. The sea is also part of territorial claims and has claimants that have drawn the attention of the international community because of its location and resources (Loi, Quang et al. 2017).

In current years, no other international sea show has drawn more attention than the complex islands of the SCS. This debate takes account of six governments to regional power and sea rights; and integrates the basic ocean contour of communication that connects Southeast Asia with Upper East Asia that spans probably the largest fishing area that can hold perhaps, an endless reserve of oil and gas besides being naturally endowed. In SCS, China receives more attention due to employment powers in these waters, and islands. The developmental capacity (Storey and Fellow 2014).

Brief background on the SCS and China's claimed jurisdiction Instead the following are the four disputed islands within the SCS The Paracel Islands, The Pratas Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and the Spratly Islands between Taiwan, the Nation of Brunei and the People's Republic of China, Malaysia, Philippine Republic and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. These islands are situated in the northern Natuna Islands between Cambodia on the west side, Indonesia and China on the south side, Malaysia on the southwestern side, Taiwan on the southeastern side, and Vietnam and the Philippines on the east side. Apart from these, some other disputed small islands are claimed by both China and the (ASEAN) Association of South East Asian Nations countries such as Palawan and Luzon. Dispute regarding Sabah Island comprising of Ambalat between these ASEAN member countries. He mentioned the issue related to maritime limits in the Luzon Strait between the Philippines, China, and Taiwan. (Forsyth 2015).

China enjoys a powerful Policy of This territorial dispute among some of the southeastern Asian countries. China reckons that they have been governing and occupying these SCS islands for about 2000 years. These claims are made on the grounds of the eleven-dashed line drawn in 1947 by the nationalist government of China (Chung 2016). Finally, the People's Republic of China did shift the eleven-dash aggressiveness regarding its claims in the SCS dispute. Vietnam as well as the Philippines both had an armed conflict for the occupation of these islands that had been executed, in 1974, 1988, and 1995, and recently in 2012 had the most important armed conflict which made all these states more aggressive and harsh in their attitude regarding SCS. The current issues of China, the Philippines, and Vietnam started in 2009 when the Philippines and Malaysia submitted their documents to the UNCLOS. It has led to many confrontations among regional countries in the neighborhood of the SCS. As the evidence of the supremacy and sovereignty of the Republic of Vietnam in the SCS the three white papers against the claimant's states have been issued in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Vietnam asserts that it successfully obtained these islands from France. (Banlaoi 2021).

It also is very powerful over the SCS esp. over Spartlys Island. The Philippines explained that these islands are in the 200 NM EEZ of the Philippines territory under the UNCLOS. The Philippines' History on the issuance states that in the year 1954, a Filipino trader by the name of Thomas Cloma discovered the islands in the SCS. The Philippines claims sovereignty over the islands because the islands when

discovered were unowned. In support of this claim, there is the doctrine of 'terra nullius' which translates means 'land belonging to no one.' (Panda 2021).

China claimed its territorial sea in the SCS in 1949; Taiwan followed it in 1956. Furthermore, Taiwan has claimed Taiping Island in the Spratlys Islands and stationed permanent military personnel on the island. In 1970, the western state of the Spratlys Islands claimed five features from the Philippines. South Vietnam controlled six features and claimed the Paracel and Spratlys Islands as part of South Vietnam province in 1974. The same year Chinese Vessels seized control over the Paracel Islands from Vietnam. 1983 saw three features in the Spratlys Islands occupied by the Malaysian Government and two more features in 1986. The author explains how the claims to territory with the Malaysian legislation. This state shares most of its border with Indonesia's Tudjuh Archipelago and with the Philippines. The Malaysian Tudjuh Archipelago does not even have a border with Vietnam's continental shelf. Vietnam said it asserted this continental from 1979 till now and it is halfway between the Vietnamese baseline and the Malaysian shore. This territorial conflict is yet unknown, but both states have recognized that Brunei can use 200 NM (Nautical Miles) of EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone), but Malaysia has not ratified this agreement. (Kraska 2019).

Be that as it may, the following 50 years saw quickening enthusiasm for the SCS. In 1955 and 1956, China and Taiwan built up perpetual existences on a few key islands, while a Philippine native Thomas Cloma guaranteed a great part of the Spratly Island chain as his own.

Assumptions of Strategic Hedging Theory

The authors (Tessman and Wolfe 2011) describe four assumptions of strategic hedging theory that are given below:

A country needs to improve its economic condition strengthen public goods as competitive tools and reduce its military confrontation with other states.

To avoid confrontation, the state must be part of external balancing by entering military alliances against that country to be hedged. A country who is hedging against another country should strengthen its internal balancing by increasing its military collection and making itself strong from a military point of view.

It is a strategy of the highest level of government that should be centrally coordinated because it proves the Prior issues close to the national security of the hedging state.

Hedging states should be prepared to accept any consequences related to domestic and international costs as a part of the strategy.

Definitions of Strategic Hedging

Strategic hedging has been defined by various scholars in different ways. Some of the definitions are given below.

Hedging involves adopting strategies to address uncertainties and high-stake situations by avoiding taking sides and pursuing opposite measures vis-à-vis competing powers, aiming to have a fallback option. This behavior is often observed

in smaller states facing the uncertainties stemming from the actions of major powers (Goh 2007).

Hedging means keeping open for more than one strategic option against the prospect of upcoming security (Medeiros 2005).

Hedging is a concept that refers to a country's behavior in which that country attempts to pursue numerous strategic options, which are envisioned to yield mutual thwarting effects in the condition of high stakes and uncertainties (Leu 2022).

Strategic hedging is a protective strategy for countries, aiming to safeguard against potential worsening of relations with a dominant state or the denial of public goods by that state. It involves avoiding taking sides and pursuing opposite measures to have a fallback option (Alnuaimi 2020).

Hedging is a strategy of weaker states against great powers avoiding confrontation and maximizing benefits by joining hands with great powers (Liou & Hsu, 2017, p. 2).

Strategic hedging theory concentrates on increasing its military capability due to its growing economic power. Strategic hedging includes the powerful alliance of weak states with regional and powerful states against confrontational powerful states (Le Hong 2013).

Historical Background of the SCS and China's Asserted Claims

The SCS is home to territorial disputes among several Southeast Asian states. The Chinese claim that they had historically controlled and occupied these SCS islands for 2000 years ago (Lee 2017). These claims made by China are based on the eleven-dash line that was proposed in 1947 by the nationalist government of China of that time. Later, the People's Republic of China altered the eleven-dash line to the nine-dash line. China possesses a strong policy of assertiveness for its claims in the SCS dispute (Dirmeikis 2018).

A few inquiries stay answerless: does China pledge the whole territory of the nine-dash line or simply the islands inside it? Or, on the other hand, does China guarantee the EEZ and the mainland rack highlights? China acknowledges that once it reveals its stance on significant water cases, it would be challenging to refrain from defending its position under current international law. China supports the 2002 ASEAN Declaration on the Code of Parties for the SCS to be resolved. It must be quiet and should maintain a strategic distance from any one-sided activities. China contradicts any global association dealing with the assets of the SCS. Rather, China favors reciprocal transactions that can command and if important, build up a two-sided joint assertion. China needs to maintain a strategic distance from any aggregate ASEAN mediation, which could transform into multidimensional arrangements. China is concerned that the US or other countries may dominate the arrangements in multilateral transactions (Blue Economy and Verde).

This paper has shown that China has ancient and contemporary reasons that make it lay claim to the SCS. In the past, China claimed sovereignty over the area, despite the nine-dash line map, which is considered by others as an unlawful assertion of territorial waters. This claim has drawbacks from neighboring countries like the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia Brunei, and Vietnam. This triggered the construction of the high-security network plan, Jixi Fang adopted in 1995 to protect

significant vital economic cities along the Eastern seacoast of China. Other activities including the reclamation of new land and military infrastructure within the SCS add to China's position. That's why the Chinese desire to take control of territorial waters, sea beds, and airspace and the US counter by FON operations and assertive international oceanography pose a threat, requiring diplomacy as a roadmap to avoid an arms race that threatens to destabilize the international maritime law system. (Saleem 1999).

China has laid its legal claim over SCS as long as the country of China itself was in existence. Chinese authors and historical evidence prove that the Chinese sailed from SCS to the Han Dynasty which was from (206 to 220)AD. Chinese further claim that time people fishing in these waters SCS Han Dynasty administration issued many administrative and legal orders regarding Hainan Island in the SCS Sea (Chang, China's Claim of Sovereignty over Spratly and Paracel Islands: Two different – yet strongly related – perspectives; The Historical and Legal aspects of Health Care Reform: A Historical and Legal Perspective, December 31, 1991). The Southern and Northern dynasties of China from 420-589 continued to work and police two significant Paracel and Spratly Islands. During this dynasty, the Chinese also strengthened their claims over the SCS through writers like Xia Lingyun (385-433) whose writings presented their views. (Rossi 2017).

Geographical Location

The SCS is about 3.5 million square kilometers and significantly acts as an important shipping lens through which some world's trade flow transits. According to trading data, the SCS was utilized in 2016 to transport \$3.4 trillion in trade, which was 21% of the total global trade value in that year. The combined traffic of this region accounts for 30 percent of the crude oil and about 50.2 percent of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) traded globally in a year and as such it is considered as one of the vital energy transit corridors in the world. The SCS is a site of multiple overlapping territorial disputes involving several nations, and various assessments suggest that the volume of trade flowing through the SCS ranges from 20% to 33% of global maritime trade. Given its high concentration of commercial goods and its strategic geographical position, the SCS has become a critical artery for trade among some of the largest economies worldwide. The area's immense economic and geopolitical importance has attracted considerable attention, with its role as a vital conduit for global commerce and energy resources being a focal point of international interest (Quyet 2023).

Major Disputed Islands

China as well as Vietnam has historical and geographical rights to the control of the islands. Vietnam has proclaimed itself the rightful sovereign of both the West Philippine Sea/Paracels and the SCS/Spratlys at least since the seventeenth century and it has the historical and legal evidence to prove it. China believes that the sovereignty of these islands is rooted in historicity, for it announced the discovery of the islands in the 2nd Century BC and specifies that the place had been marked since the Eastern Han Dynasty (Pedrozo 2023).

The islands Spratly and Paracel in the region, the SCS, continue to be a bone of contention between countries. China, Taiwan, and Vietnam collectively claimed the

Paracel Islands, whereas Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam collectively claimed the Spratly Islands. These have been enduring conflicts defined by diplomatic stasis and military containment strategies for the better part of a century. They are important, primarily, because of their position to prime movers, nature abundance, and fishing zones. The United States has also acted in the region, performing FONOPs to contest China's claims of sovereignty and fortifying backing for Southeast Asian allies. Dongsha Quandao or Pratas Islands include one island and two banks and only Dongsha island emerges from the surface of the water. These are a group of islands situated southeast of Hong Kong and are part of the territory of Taiwan. Nevertheless, there is another Chinese aspect in the SCS conflict, the island of Pratas belongs to China, according to China. Thus, there are several territorial disagreements all over the area, as well as tendencies in the militarization of these islands and constant attempts to solve the issues peacefully. It has been identified that the possession of the region has strategic importance, and many countries are inclined toward it which has put the region into a complex and unspecified position (Mitchell 2023).

A sunken atoll of underwater reefs and shoals stretching like a belt in the SCS, Macclesfield Bank is under the claim of both China and Taiwan. Fishes found in the area do not belong to Philippine territory and are not within the territory area of the Philippines. Another territory in dispute between China and the Philippines is the Scarborough Shoal in the western part of the Philippine territory. Today Macclesfield Bank is occupied by China, the same does Scarborough Shoal. The Macclesfield Bank is made up of 25 reefs and has an ocean area of 6,448 square kilometers considered to be one of the largest atolls globally. The Scarborough Shoal is a territorial argument of China, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Kao 2014).

Economic Significance

The SCS is rich in energy resources, with an actual probable reserve base of 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil. The majority of these resources are located in waters that are not disputed, close to the shorelines of coastal countries. Additionally, there is potential for more hydrocarbons in under-explored areas, although these are not currently considered commercial reserves due to economic feasibility concerns. The presence of these resources has attracted significant geopolitical and economic interest due to their potential impact on global energy markets and the ongoing territorial disputes in the region. The SCS also holds other natural resources such as minerals for industrial use and salt mines, increasing its importance for the neighboring countries.

The Sea is part of the western Pacific Ocean and is an important sea route for the transportation of goods and services between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Annually, billions of dollars, or about 21% to 40% of world trade pass through the SCS. The SCS is significantly more important to countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, as they consider a large percentage of their marine commercial traffic the SCS. In addition, the SCS has become a significant energy route because the annual traffic of crude oil is as much as a third of the world total for the amount of liquefied natural gas as much as over fifty percent of the annual traffic (Zhong, White et al. 2017).

The Sea serves as a vital link between Asia, America, and Europe through its strategic maritime routes. The sea encompasses some of the world's busiest shipping

ports, making it a crucial passageway for international trade and transportation. Additionally, the Spratly Islands, which stretch about 1,000 km, are situated in the SCS and play a significant role in the passage of shipping and air traffic in the region (O'Rourke, Economics of South et al. 2022).

SCS is a region of great strategic significance, where Chinese military modernization directly challenges external threats from Vietnam, the Philippines, and the US. This area is central to Asia-Pacific security, with high and escalating stakes. China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries are competing for control, with China constructing military bases and artificial islands in the SCS. (Seo 2024).

Trade Routes

The sea directly links 64.5+% Chinese foreign trade by sea and \$3.4 trillion of world sea-borne trade in 2016. China heavily depends on sea lines for economic continuity and a lot of significance is attached to the Malacca straits. That. The SCS is currently one of the world's major centers for the transit of international oil, with 30% of global oil shipments and 50% of LNG passing through the area per year. (Burch 2019).

SCS is a key, transit zone of international shipping with approximately 20% to 33% of the global shipping tonnage transiting through the region including approximately a third of the world's export oil and LNG. This region is strategically significant as the result of ongoing territorial disputes and also acts as a major energy transfer point between African/Persian Gulf producers and Asian consumers (Yetiv and Lu 2007). The SCS is filled with promising sea trade since approximately \$3 370 billion worth of shipments transit across the region yearly, which constitutes 30% of the world seaborne trade. Two of the Singapore ports in the south and the Hong Kong ports in the north regions act as main stops on this route (Tyler 2024).

Natural Resources

World population in 2012 was at 7 billion and it is projected to be more than 9 billion by the middle of this current year, 2050. China will likely have a population of 1.46 billion in 2030. Vietnam is expected to grow up to 25 percent more by mid-century. This population increase becomes a problem in confronting the growing need for natural resources as well as energy. With more than one-quarter of the earth's surface bearing exploited natural resources, the world is in dire need of new resources especially those in the sea bed. Deep seabed mining as the extraction of mineral resources from the ocean floor has attracted attention primarily because terrestrial resources are being depleted, and the need for key metals is increasing. The International Seabed Authority through which future seabed mining will be governed has been establishing regulations and environmental conditions for using the seabed so as not to harm the environment. To formulate proper decisions concerning the future of deep-sea mining, its environmental, social, and economic implications need to be primarily evaluated(Gupta and Studies 2010).

The share of fishery in 2015 reached a global 15 percent and it is one of the richest countries for fishing the SCS is the major supplier of animal protein. Nevertheless, fishing is another problem as the region has witnessed overfishing and fisheries-related crimes which have reduced stock frighteningly and are a danger to the food

security of millions of people. The other causes include the failure of the international agreements to provide effective governance of the fisheries in the disputed territories in this sea, which has eventually contributed to overfishing. The world's largest fishing fleet China has been blamed for the over-exploitation of fisheries resources in its domestic as well as in other countries' territorial waters (Zhang 2018).

Importance of the SCS for China

Lacking all forms of diplomatic restraint, China is strategically and economically centered on SCS where it seeks to dominate, deter others, and safeguard its supply-sea line of communication and access to resources. To this end, China has developed new capabilities consisting of building artificial reefs and structures and has recently declared exploratory rights to prospective oil fields in the sea. SCS is an important trade channel; the annual throughput in 2016 stood at an estimated \$3.4 trillion, which proportionately represents world trade. SCS is relevant to China's economic security because more than 60% of the country's import and export goods are transported by sea (Stanley 2016).

Currently in this sea, China has a deterrence policy that enhances its military muscles, which is an increased threat to all the actors in the region inclusive of the US, and Japan among others. It has, therefore, created a power rivalry wherein the US tries to forge relations with the ASEAN countries to contain the Chinese influence. The US and its allies engaging in the regional politics of balancing the growth of China are exposed to the problem of collective action traps. Despite the US's attempts to contribute to security in the region alongside holding security cooperation with the near-region countries, China has increased its military assertiveness in the SCS, which drew doubts on the proficiency of the US (Storey 2013).

Importance for Vietnam

Vietnam's territorial claim over the SCS and the minor islands of Paracel and Spratly has a very old background. The country has been very much interested in the development of oil and gas resources in the region for the support of its economy and energy demands. Namely, Vietnam's State-owned company 'Petro Vietnam' has entered many partnership agreements with national as well as international oil and gas-related companies for this very reason. The addition of land in the Spratly Islands has also been blamed on Vietnam and in the recent past has become the second largest island builder after China. Vietnam has enough legal and historical material to support these demands, and to strengthen her demands politically and militarily she has issued decrees, and official declarations, and has fought a war in the area. Subsequent territorial conflict is prominent to consists of China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. (Nguyen and Turksen 2020).

Importance for the Philippines

The Philippines' claimed rights of the Spratly Islands include geographical proximity, effective occupation, and UNCLOS 1982. The Philippines affirms that the area plays an important role in defense, revenue, and GDP because of natural resources and considerations of strategy. Nevertheless, it is an area in which China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei still heavily dispute, making the Situation in the Southern China Sea a very complicated one. It also critically describes the

area as lacking diplomatic standoff and the use of military pressure techniques especially due to China's extensive land reclamation and military deployment. The country has made deals with international oil companies for oil and gas production in the SCS including the Spratly Islands. Further, the territory of the Spratly Islands and surrounding waters are sources of fish and other fishery, The Filipino fishermen are dominant figures of the said area. The fishing industry is an important sub-sector of the Philippines' economy with at least 15 percent of the population directly dependent on and accounts for about 4.3 percent of the Philippines' Gross Domestic Product. The Philippines has also stepped up military collaboration with the United States; the last two years have seen the US gain access to several military facilities in the Philippines. Part of this expansion is viewed as in reaction to apprehensions about China's activities in the SCS and bouts over Taiwan. The current deployment of US military forces in the Philippines is principally for improving readiness and preparing to deal with any kind of calamity or humanitarian intervention in this part of the world (De Castro 2018).

Philippines and Vietnam Strategic Hedging Against China

Vietnam has strategic dominance on the Spratly Island in the SEA region and has been unrelentingly categorized as a part of Vietnam's core interest. Vietnam has brought the issue to an international court to get support from the international society at the same time Vietnam has opted for a strategic partnership with Russia, India as well as the US. In addition, Vietnam has formed a strong partnership with the United States to balance China's influence in the region. This collaboration involves working together on issues like the SCS dispute and promoting regional stability. In the economic sector, Vietnam and Japan have signed an agreement for oil and gas exploration in the Spratly Islands to diversify their economic activities.

Vietnam has executed comprehensive partnerships with Australia in 2009 and the US in 2013. Vietnamese Defense Minister Manh appreciated the bilateral military, economic, and political relations of both countries and hoped to strengthen traditional friendship and the development of bilateral relationships (Tu and Nguyen 2019).

In 2014, the Philippines and the U.S. reinforced their security partnership in the form of the EDCA to improve their security in SCS and to address the rising Chinese aggression (De Castro 2014).

China's strategy ends in the South China Sea.

China has significantly increased its maritime militia presence in the SCS by 35% in the past year, reinforcing its control around key features in the region. This expansion aligns with China's broader strategy to assert dominance amidst escalating tensions, including the full militarization of at least three islands with advanced military capabilities. Routine patrols by China's naval and air forces aim to protect its sovereignty and maritime rights, with a focus on deterring disruptive activities and potential conflicts. These actions have sparked concerns internationally, particularly regarding China's aggressive military buildup and its impact on regional stability and territorial disputes, notably with countries like the Philippines (Garver 1992).

Chinese strategies in the SCS dispute are mainly related to the economy, diplomatic, and military. China is putting its efforts to increase its pace of economic advancement. The claimants of the SCS dispute have strong economic interdependence with China due to their trade volume. China has pursued a policy of economic advancement that yearned to help China maintain its effect in the troubled waters dispute as well as strong connections with the claimants of the SCS dispute. China utilizes its economy to manage the external influence on the claimants of the SCS dispute. China has deepened its trade ties with the claimants of the SCS dispute bilaterally and multilaterally. Bilaterally, China has taken its trade with the claimants of the SCS dispute to such an extent that China is a top trading partner of different claimant states. China has taken multilateral economic initiatives to manage its influence in the SCS dispute and the SEA region (Peng, Ngeow et al. 2022).

Military Development Approach

Chinese economic development has also encouraged its military modernization. Military modernization has pushed China to gain dominance in the SCS dispute as compared to the other claimants of the SCS dispute. China enhanced its nuclear capability and invested many resources in its nuclear ballistic missile submarine capability. China has developed anti-access weapons like missiles, fighter jets, and defense systems to defend against outside threats. These are meant to stop enemy forces from freely moving in certain areas and to protect China's interests in the Asia-Pacific region, especially around Taiwan and the SCS. The U.S. and its allies are working on ways to counter these Chinese weapons by improving cooperation and deploying advanced defense technologies (Glaser 2015).

During modernization, the Chinese military transformed itself into a high-technology network force infantry-heavy and low-technology with an increase in importance on joint air and naval operations. New challenges to mainland China with territorial disputes mainly encouraged China to modernize its military. The foreign military presence in the SEA region is creating security concerns for China. Chinese development in the SCS islands includes the deployment of the radar system in the Spratlys for invigilation of airspace in the region refuelling station and storage tank (Lawrence, Lum et al. 2021).

In the SCS, China is utilizing its military to safeguard its claims and interests. China and Malaysia also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation in 2014 under which both countries concluded the first joint military exercise. Military modernization has helped China in the production of several firearms and defense weapons to maintain its influence in the SCS dispute, as other claimants of the SCS dispute do not have such power capacity. China's navy is expanding and becoming more aggressive in controlling the area of the SCS and backing up its rights in it. For this, China has installed anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) weapons in SCS areas to counter external military intervention in the conflict. Chinese military modernization has increased its power projection and the defense of the occupied islands in the SCS dispute. Due to military modernization, China has developed such capabilities that can propel the external military from entering into the Chinese sphere of influence in the disputed SCS (Martinson 2024).

In 2010, it was reported that China was building a Yulin naval base near Hainan Island that could station nuclear submarines. Furthermore, China is mainly

upgrading its military power indigenous. China's new capability of producing a Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system changed the defense posture of mainland China. Recently, China has become more assertive by deploying H-6K nuclear-capable bombers to its artificial islands and started military exercises and training for a battle in the SCS. The Chinese government installed its first operational military imaging satellites and sky wave radar system in 2009 which can detect targets 2000 KM beyond China's coastline (Bommakanti 2018).

Previously, Chinese surface-to-air missiles did not have much capacity to counter the incoming ballistic missiles. Since 2013, the continuous advancement of Chinese technology of the BMD is shaping a comparison between the US and China-made BMD systems that they possess the same reasonable good quality and capabilities. Chinese are also in the process of producing fifth-generation aircraft, like J-20 and FC-31/J31, which are going to give strength to Chinese air operations and up gradation of the People's Liberation Army Air Force. Chinese development in the SCS islands includes the deployment of the radar system in the Spratlys for invigilation of airspace in the region. Refuelling station and storage tank, and surface-to-air missiles deployment on Paracel islands. China showed its military power like it tested stealth fighter jets and created ADIZ without the consultation of its neighboring countries. ADIZ includes airspace over several small islands which are claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan. Chinese armed forces are also changing their posture in fighting modern-era conflict and warfare, as they are increasing the controlled environment exercises(Beckley 2017).

Vietnam Hedging Against China

Vietnamese inclination to hedge China politically, initiated a process to improve strong political relations in 1991 and reached its culmination. Although the SCS dispute consistently affects these relations the leadership of both countries agreed to solve the matters through bilateral dialogues. This is the reason that the heads of state of both countries have been paid thirty-six state visits to each other countries from 1991 to 2013 and this phenomenon has consistently increased. Following are the details of the Vietnamese head of state's visits to China from 2000 to current present time (Jonell, Clift et al. 2017).

Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai paid a visit to China in December 2000, May and October 2004, and July 2005. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has paid the following visits to China on his term; October 2008, April, October 2009, and May 2010. On the other hand, the President of Vietnam visited China to improve political and economic relations in both countries and to reduce the conflicts through bilateral political dialogues. Following are the visits of the president of Vietnam to China; Tran Duc Luong made official visits to China in December 2000 and July 2005. President Nguyen Minh Triet arrived in China in May 2007 and August 2008. President Truong Tan Sang visited China in June 2013. Party-to-party contact is part of the Vietnam political hedging strategy to China. For this purpose, General Secretary of CPV Nong Duc Manh visited China in November 2001, April 2003, August 2006, and May 2008. General Secretary of CPV Nguyen Phu Trong visited China in October 2011 (Hiep, 2013). Vietnam and China signed an agreement to manage the dispute in the SCS in October 2011. This agreement contains the provision of a bilateral meeting between Vietnam and China will be held twice a

year. They will establish a hotline to deal the disputes in case of emergency and avoid any misunderstanding in the SCS (Bristow, 2011). Vietnamese political moves show that Vietnam has an interest in securing its stacks in the SCS for this purpose it is using politics as a tool for hedging China.

Philippines Hedging Strategy

The Spratly Islands also referred to as the Kalyan Islands Group has always been in dispute within the Philippines and China. The Duterte administration in the Philippines has pursued a Second Track or instinctive hedging policy to manage China and the United States. This approach maintains balanced senate defense ties with both nations to protect the country's interest and safety in the SCS tensions heightened under President Benigno Aquino III's presidency year, the Philippines filed a case against China's claim of the nine-dash line in the international tribunal of The Hague. However, in July 2016, the court ruling was in favor of the Philippines but China did not agree and was ok with turning the friendship into an enmity between the Philippines and China. In this regard, the President of the Philippines Duterte came up with another Strategy called Strategic Hedging, On the one hand, the Philippines has been developing very close economic and political relations with China, at the same time building stronger defense relations with the USA. For the Philippines, the management of uncertainty regarding state relations, prospect for economic partnership, and security can be characterized as a strategic hedging framework. This will help seek out balance between the streams of economic as well as security cooperation with China, and the United States to manage risks within the region precipitated by the rivalry between the superpowers. The Philippines has a better defense deal through EDCA with the United States, this proves that the state has enhanced its defense since 2014. It has also been struggling to find a new economic position with China, which balances a more complicated approach to the relations with both powers. Therefore, the hedging strategy of the Philippines means that the Philippines has been engaging both China and the US, so the Philippines has been pursuing its economic and security interests as well as security in the competition of China-US rivalry in SCS (Liu and Administration 2024).

Discussion

The SCS refers to the territorial and sovereignty disputes over maritime structures and waters mainly between China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan. It is an important trading hub, there is more than \$5 trillion of cargo that passes through it per annum. The conflict is based on a historical context and some states' titles to make sovereignty claims that create tensions that endanger the stability and development of the region. India and the United States have played a part in increasing the conflict in the SCS as they look to challenge China and its increasingly aggressive actions in the region. The dispute has also caused conflicts and confrontations in China with some of the claimant countries raising concerns about freedom of navigation and stability in the region. The United States' interaction with the SCS has been through freedom of navigation operations and over-flight operations to counter China and affirm America's stand on the principle of freedom of navigation. However, China's continuous assertiveness in SCS has raised questions about U.S. credibility and its competence to effectively push back Beijing. Some of the countries mentioned to have received security assistance from

the US include the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but most of them could not co-ordinate in a collective action to counter Chinese maritime assertiveness. The “hub and spokes” model of multilateral security has constrained the US in building a formation of cooperation that will help it counter a strengthening China in the SCS. Nevertheless, the United States does not abandon the principles of freedom of navigation and the further conflict in the sea area. India's interests in the SCS issue have been rising recently, even though New Delhi has no territorial disputes with China or the ASEAN members. The physical and diplomatic expansion of operation in the SCS, as well as the interaction with the claimant countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, has been a cause of concern to China with growing Indian relations. As India does not have any member claim in the SCS disputes asserted by China and Vietnam improperly, its changing stance and expanding defense cooperation project a long-term shift in some ways. India has been getting more actively engaged in the SCS and the US has so far been in support of this process as both sides have similar opposed interests concerning China in the region. However, India's influence in the SCS is limited by its lack of strong alliances and a direct military presence in the area, as well as its primary focus on maintaining dominance over the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, India's growing presence in the SCS is expected to continue, potentially complicating the existing disputes and internationalizing the issue.

Conclusion

China considers the SCS as its core interest and Chinese foreign policy is very clear in this matter. Chinese civil and military (PLA) establishment and politicians are united regarding the SCS dispute. China developed its parameters like land and maritime trade routes through the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road because networking, connectivity, infrastructure, and trade are the main components of China's new Asian economic strategy. China motivated the regional states to sort out its disputes without the involvement of the US and adopted friendly relations with the claimant states. Continuous diplomatic engagement among the claimant countries of the SCS dispute is essential for maintaining peace in the region. Any alteration of the existing status quo could jeopardize the peace of the entire area. Both the Philippines and Vietnam view China as an assertive state and seek to establish close relations with China to prevent its assertive actions. The United States has strong political, economic, and military alliances with the Philippines, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries. The US has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the SCS to counter China's influence, indicating its intention to sustain its dominance in East Asia.

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