

# CHINA'S CONSOLIDATION STRATEGY IN THE NEAR SEAS

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Emerging as a maritime great power (MGP) is one of the main strategic objectives of China in the 21st century. The MGP strategy has two variants; 'active offshore defence' and 'far seas protection'. Securing near seas resolutely is increasingly playing a central role in China's active offshore defence strategy.<sup>1</sup> Near seas include the Yellow Sea, East China Sea (ECS), and the South China Sea (SCS), as they are close to the land border (Fig. 1). Among them, the Yellow Sea is the least controversial, while the South China Sea is highly volatile. The presence of the US military in the western Pacific, along with various alliance mechanisms, is the major source of threat to security in the near seas. The near seas are also affected by territorial disputes between China and neighbouring states: China is involved in a territorial dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. China claims 90 per cent of the South China Sea waterbody that includes the Spratly and Paracel Islands, which are at the same time claimed by other Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. The Chinese stand on these disputes is claimed to be based on history. China claims its centuries old ownership of these territories was lost after the arrival of the colonial powers. China now believes that the continuation of US military alliances in

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1. M. Taylor Fravel, *China's Military Strategy Since 1949: Active Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

the region—despite the end of the Cold War—has been to prevent China's legitimate claim to its 'lost' territories and to prevent its rise as a major international power. China considers that Taiwan, the Senkakus, and the Spratly and Paracel Islands are an integral part of China. However, the US naval presence in the western Pacific is the major obstacle in the unification of Taiwan with mainland China, and annexing the disputed territories in the ECS and SCS. Thus, preventing US access to the near seas, and gaining superiority over the US in the world theatre, is an important aspect of China's near seas strategy. Possession of the near seas is not simply a matter of sovereignty issues or security of the mainland, but concerns China's ambition to emerge as a maritime great power. Undoubtedly, developments in the near seas have had a large bearing on the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Fig. 1: China's Near and Far Seas



Source: Zack Cooper and Andrew Shearer, 'Thinking clearly about China's layered Indo-Pacific strategy', in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2017, vol. 73, no. 5, p. 306.

There are four ways in which the near seas are directly connected with Chinese security strategy: sovereignty issues; as a gateway to the open ocean; as 'strategic frontiers'; and the power projection scenario. The Chinese government claims sovereignty over the larger part of the East and South China Seas (E/SCS) based on the historical maps that existed during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1664). Subsequently, when the Chinese central government became weak, China had to accept unequal treaties with the western colonial powers, leading to loss of control over the maritime territories. However, the current Chinese claim on the majority of the waterbodies in the SCS is based on a U-shaped line unilaterally drawn by the nationalist government in 1947.<sup>2</sup> This led to friction with other claimants from Southeast Asian countries. Also, the Taiwan conflict was incorporated in the 1982 constitution of the PRC, which in its preamble mentions that, "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the PRC. It is the lofty duty of the entire Chinese people, including compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland."<sup>3</sup> Today, both the Taiwan problem and the SCS disputes are 'core issues' of the PRC.

China is a trading nation and economic activity has concentrated on the coastal areas, making maritime trade the lifeline of China's economy. Without crossing the near seas it is difficult for China to conduct international trade. The near seas are the gateways to the open ocean. Over 90 per cent by volume and over 80 per cent by value of China's trade is conducted through sea routes. China's security strategy aims at facilitating the availability of natural resources and raw materials. Protection of the sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs) has acquired significant traction in China's security strategy in recent times as disruption in trade routes would severely impact China's economic growth. A crisis in the Taiwan Strait would expose the Chinese economy's vulnerability to the disruptions of seaborne trade. Defending the near seas is

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2. Office of the Naval Intelligence, "The People's Liberation Army: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics", at <https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/pla-navy.pdf>. Accessed on August 20, 2020.

3. The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, at [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content\\_1372962.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372962.htm). Accessed on August 20, 2020.

**Since its inception in 1949 China has considered certain areas are strategic frontiers that have stretched beyond its immediate borders and which China has attempted to change at various times. These include territories in Mongolia, eastern Russia, Central Asia, Taiwan, and the offshore islands in the South and East China Seas, Indochina border areas, and Himalayan and Pamir mountain ranges, where China was willing to deploy forces to protect its interests.**

therefore as important as protecting the homeland of China.

The near seas also belong to the 'strategic frontiers' of China. Strategic frontiers is "a concept in security studies that attempts to delineate territorial parameters of a nation's national security interests, i.e. territory to which it would be willing to commit military forces in pursuit of goals that it defines to be in its national interests."<sup>4</sup> They need not be adjacent to the territorial boundaries of the nation, and indeed often involve redefinition and extension of the boundaries. Strategic frontiers are assumed the first line of defence, crossing it by an enemy power means national security is in grave danger.

All major powers have delineated their strategic frontiers and at times applied military force to defend them.<sup>5</sup> Since its inception in 1949 China has considered certain areas are strategic frontiers that have stretched beyond its immediate borders and which China has attempted to change at various times. These include territories in Mongolia, eastern Russia, Central Asia, Taiwan, and the offshore islands in the South and East China Seas, Indochina border areas, and Himalayan and Pamir mountain ranges, where China was willing to deploy forces to protect its interests. Today, "China's perceived strategic frontiers can be said to include the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait, the SCS, the ECS in addition to its current territorial boundaries, and claimed jurisdiction over the aforementioned territories."<sup>6</sup> The importance of securing the maritime strategic frontiers of China has been highlighted in the

4. David Shambaugh, "The insecurity of security: The PLA's evolving doctrine and threat perceptions towards 2000", *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, no. 13, 1994, 3-25.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

2006 defence white paper which states that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy/PLAN) has been tasked at "gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defence operations".<sup>7</sup> In recent times China has demonstrated its intention to use force to secure its perceived strategic frontiers beyond its defined borders to deprive others from gaining a strategic advantage over China. To defend its maritime strategic frontiers, China has sought to acquire sea denial capability, popularly known as Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), which could "disrupt and complicate the operations" of the US and other navies in the near sea waters.

**In order to project Chinese power across the spectrum, it needs to consolidate its position in the nearby periphery to show to the world that it can resolutely defend its coasts and prevent threats emanating by the seas. China's naval modernisation launched in the 1990s was aimed at defending the near seas and preventing enemy powers from approaching it.**

In order to project Chinese power across the spectrum, it needs to consolidate its position in the nearby periphery to show to the world that it can resolutely defend its coasts and prevent threats emanating by the seas. China's naval modernisation launched in the 1990s was aimed at defending the near seas and preventing enemy powers from approaching it. One of its prized weapons—the carrier killer missiles DF-21D and DF-26D—that China developed was to prevent US aircraft carriers from getting access to the near seas areas.<sup>8</sup> Any vulnerability in the waters of the near seas will have a major impact on China's emergence as a maritime great power in the 21st century.

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7. The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2006", December 2006, Beijing, at [http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2006/defense2006\(2\).html](http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2006/defense2006(2).html). Accessed on August 25, 2020.

8. Daniel J. Kostecka, "Aerospace Power and China's Counterstrike Doctrine in the Near Seas", in Andrew S. Erickson, Ryan D. Martinson and Peter A. Dutton (eds.), *China Near Seas Combat Capabilities*, CMSI Red Books, Study No. 11, 2014, pp. 49-60, at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=cmsi-red-books>. Accessed on August 30, 2020.

## CHINA AND THE NEAR SEAS

With a continental power mindset, China had not considered the maritime domain as a strategic area before the 1970s; accordingly, PLA Navy's activities were confined to areas near its coasts. The naval strategy during this period had focused on coastal defence, and the early operational area of the navy had been between the coastlines of Shanghai and Hong Kong.<sup>9</sup> In the naval strategy that was articulated by Mao in 1953, the mission for the PLA Navy was "to eliminate the Republic of China (ROC) Navy's interference and ensure safe navigation for China's maritime commerce, prepare to recover Taiwan, and oppose aggression from the Sea".<sup>10</sup> The activities of the navy were focused on protecting the coast from invading forces only. There were a number of naval engagements that occurred between the PLA Navy and the Nationalist Navy over control of the small islands in the near seas such as Hainan, Zhoushan, Wanshan, Four Islands in the southern coasts, which led China to take control of the islands from the Nationalist Government of Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> After a series of losses of small islands to mainland China, Taiwan Navy made two attempts to attack the mainland coast during August and November 1965, but failed in both missions, losing four major ships in the battle.<sup>12</sup> This helped PLA Navy to gain local superiority along the coastal waters over a technically superior navy. This boosted the confidence of the PLA Navy to conduct more missions beyond the coastal areas. China conducted two more missions in the South China Sea—Xisha (Paracel) islands in 1979, and Nansha (Spratly) islands in 1988—and defeated Vietnamese forces, which led to China claiming almost 90 per cent of the South China Sea. China took control of Mischief Reef from the Philippines in 1994, again using force.

In the era of the Soviet threat that China faced during the 1970s, China's naval strategy was to protect the coastal areas where Soviets could mount an

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9. Alexander C. Huang, "The PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999: From Coastal Defense to Distant Operations", in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. Mcdevitt (eds.), *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

10. Bruce A. Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982).

11. Huang, "The PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999", n. 5.

12. Bernard D. Cole, "The History of the Twenty-First-Century Chinese Navy", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2004, pp. 43-62.

invasion by sea. The Soviet Pacific fleet was powerful enough to challenge US supremacy in the Pacific. Disrupting the advance of the Soviet navy in the east was the main mission of the PLAN during this period, and the mainstay of the armoury were frigates, submarine chasers, torpedo boats, guided-missile fast attack craft, diesel-electric submarines, and shore-based tactical bombers to patrol the near seas.<sup>13</sup>

When the Soviet threat dissipated by the end of the 1980s on account of the normalisation of relations between the two, China shifted its attention from preventing a Soviet land invasion to the protection of its rights and interests in the southern theatre—that is, the maritime domain. The strategic concept of securing the Chinese mainland from superior invading forces was replaced by protecting disputed territories in the southern border as well as in the maritime domain of the East and South China Seas.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the booming coastal region had by now become the engine of Chinese economic growth and so protecting these regions had also become one of the important facets of China's defence strategy. China changed its defence strategy from Mao's 'luring the enemy deep inside' to a forward defence strategy on the maritime front with layered defence lines, namely, the first, second, and third island chains. In the forward defence strategy, China prioritised the defence of the near seas resolutely as they become part of the first island chain, and conceptualised "offshore active defence" as the main operational strategy of the PLAN. Former PLAN commander Admiral Liu Huaqing stated that the main task of the PLA Navy was to "defend actively, operate in the near seas".<sup>15</sup> The offshore active defence concept was elaborated by Admiral Liu who asserted that "the Chinese Navy should exert *effective control* of the seas within the first island chain."<sup>16</sup> The main objective of "offshore active

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13. Kamlesh Agnihotri, *Strategic Direction of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment* (Bloomsbury: New Delhi, 2015).

14. M. Taylor Fravel, *China's Military Strategy Since 1949: Active Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

15. Nan Li, "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From 'Near Coast' and 'Near Seas' to 'Far Seas'", in *Asian Security*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2009, pp. 144-69.

16. Admiral Liu's remark is quoted in Ali Honggreen, *An inside look into the Chinese Communist Navy: advancing toward the blue-water challenge* (Hong Kong: Cosmos, October 1988), cited in Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, n. 9, p. 18.

defence" has been to protect the coastal regions from attack by sea and push the theatre of actual conflict beyond the near seas. Liu further stated that "Offshore should not be interpreted as 'coastal' as we used to know it. 'Offshore' is a concept relative to the 'high seas'. It means the vast sea waters within the second island chain."<sup>17</sup> "The scope to be defended in China's sea defense strategy is 'near-seas' but not 'near-coast'."<sup>18</sup> The geographical areas of offshore active defence stretching from the Kurile islands through the islands of Japan, Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines to Borneo Island, covering the Yellow Sea, and East and South China Seas. In general, offshore active defence strategy aims to "reunify Taiwan with the mainland, restore lost and disputed maritime territories, protect China's maritime resources, secure major SLOCs in times of war, deter and defend against foreign aggression from the sea, and conduct strategic nuclear deterrence."<sup>19</sup>

Along with the 'offshore active defence' strategy, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) developed local war concepts in the late 1980s aimed at gaining local superiority over the adversary in the near seas. The A2/AD capabilities would help China to overcome US technological superiority as well as to counter US physical military dominance in the western Pacific. China has acquired various types of systems which include indigenous conventional and nuclear submarines, attack submarines from Russia, anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, advanced jet fighters to deter and disrupt the US' reinforcement of forces in a crisis with China.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it will be an insurmountable task for the US navy to break the Chinese defence and cross the near seas to help Taiwan if a conflict were to erupt over the Taiwan problem.

Protection of the near seas became apparent to support the surge in foreign trade resulting from economic reforms, and to gain commercial opportunities emerging out of the seas. The surge in foreign trade compelled

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17. Ibid.

18. Li, "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities", n. 15.

19. Ibid.

20. Andrew S. Erickson, "China's naval modernization: the implications of seapower", in *World Politics Review*, September 23, 2014, at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14083/china-s-naval-modernization-the-implications-of-seapower>. Accessed on September 2, 2020.



China to preserve its commercial and strategic interests in the maritime domain. Many ports were built along the eastern coast which helped boost exports from the special economic zones set up adjacent to the ports. Also, with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), new opportunities emerged to take potential benefits of the sea. China realised that huge opportunities had opened out of the seas but was not able to exploit them while others had surged ahead. China's focus was on "catching up with—and eventually getting ahead of the curve on—international legal developments",<sup>21</sup> that China could capture strategic benefits in the near seas before others ventured into it.

To bring near seas within the national legal framework as well as to seek legitimate claims over the waterbody, China passed laws concerning the ocean in the 1990s. The Law of the People's Republic of China Concerning the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone of 1992 expansively defined the geographical areas that China has had potential interests in, which include disputed areas concerning Taiwan and all its islands, the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands in the East China Sea, and the Paracels, Macclesfield Bank, and the Spratly in the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup> It also introduced a phrase to China's lexicon that became central to the prolonged framework concerning the near seas—*maritime rights and interests*.<sup>23</sup> Other laws followed, such as the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf, in 1998. On the basis of these laws, China laid its claims over the disputed maritime territories of E/SCS and forcefully tried to protect its interests.

## **TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE NEAR SEAS**

The near seas are crucial waterbodies in China's maritime security strategy but are territories disputed with the neighbouring countries. The origins of these disputes can be traced back to the period of the pre-PRC era when

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21. Liza Tobin, "Underway—Beijing's Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power", in *Naval War College Review*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2018, pp. 17-48.

22. "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone", *Asian Lii*, at <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/lotprocottsatz739/>. Accessed on September 12, 2020.

23. Liza Tobin, "Underway—Beijing's Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2018, pp. 17-48.

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China lost them because of unequal treaties forced upon China as a defeated party. In China's view, it was not that China launched an attack and lost the territory in battle, but imperial and colonial powers ventured into Chinese territory and continued their control until they lost their power during World War II. Beijing argues that one of the important features of the San Francisco Peace Treaty was that the territory they occupied during or prior to the war be surrendered and returned to the original holders. For them, the Chinese

territories that these powers controlled had not been returned to China; rather they left various agreements ambiguous as to who the new inheritor of the territory in question is. As a result, both the East and South China Seas are still a disputed territory.

In the East China Sea, the dispute is over the sovereignty of Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku and its affiliated islands between China, Taiwan and Japan. Japan controls the islands but China and Taiwan claim sovereign rights over them. The territory became part of Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. It then came under US control along with Okinawa after WWII but left ambiguity about the ownership of the islands when the US handed over the ownership of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. They are a group of eight uninhabited islets and rocks situated about 125 miles northeast of Taiwan and 185 miles southwest of Okinawa, Japan. Physical possession of the islets could mean sovereignty over 11,700 sq nm of the continental shelf.<sup>24</sup> The East China Sea is not wider than 400 nm across at any point. Japan claims that "Senkaku Islands are clearly an inherent part of the territory of Japan, and are under the valid control of Japan, in light of historical facts and based upon international law".<sup>25</sup> Tokyo argues that

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24. Mark J. Valencia, "Energy Security in Asia", in *Survival*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1998, pp. 97-98.

25. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Basic view on the sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands", Government of Japan, May 8, 2013, at [https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/basic\\_view.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/basic_view.html). Accessed on September 12, 2020.

there is no issue of territorial sovereignty to be resolved concerning the Senkaku Islands, which were not included under Article II of the San Francisco Peace Treaty as territories that Japan had to renounce. However, all the territories returned to Japan by the US in 1972 are an integral part of Japan. In order to resolve the dispute amicably Japan proposed a median line concept that the international boundary should be where the two 200 nm claims intersect. China claims a full 350 nm from its coastline and rejects the median line theory and maintains that the Diaoyu islands are small, uninhabited, and cannot sustain economic life of their own, so it cannot be entitled to generate continental shelf or a 200 nm EEZ under the UNCLOS.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the concerned parties continue to claim the area to acquire the vast natural resources, including oil and gas, believed to be around 100 billion barrels of oil and 175 to 210 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves.<sup>27</sup> The actions of both countries are considered as violations of sovereignty by the other. Chinese fishing trawlers, and, at times, naval ships, intruded into the exclusive economic zone surrounding the islands, and were occasionally involved in friction with the Japanese Coast Guard near the Senkaku islands.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in 2010, a Chinese fishing boat collided with two patrol boats of the Japan Coast Guard, leading to the arrest of the captain of the fishing boat by Japan. This led to a diplomatic row between China and Japan, and China suspended exports of rare earth metals to Japan. Besides, nationalist fervour was apparently instigated against Japan which

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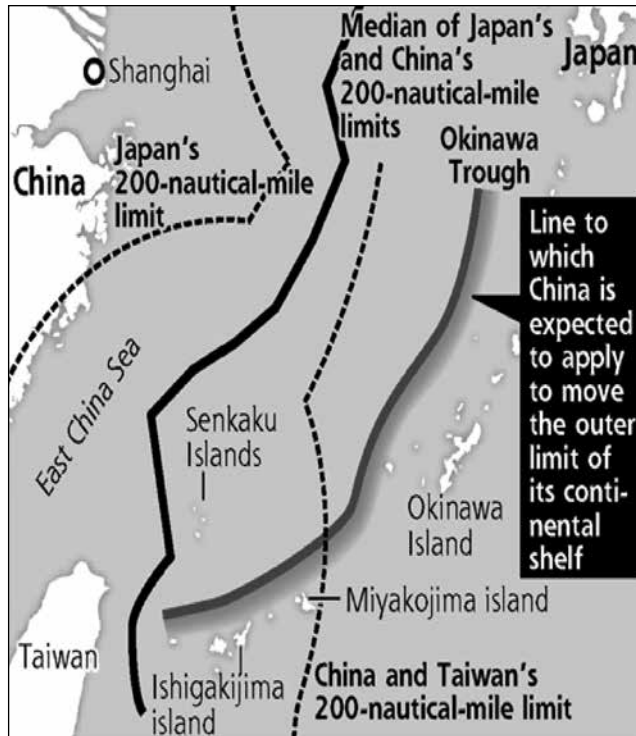
26. Steven Wei Su, "The Territorial Dispute over the Tiaoyu/Senkaku Islands: An Update", *Ocean Development & International Law*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2005, pp. 45-61.

27. Joshy M. Paul, "Territorial Dispute in the East China Sea and its Effects on China-Japan Relations", *Maritime Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-28.

28. Edmund J. Burke, Timothy R. Heath, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Logan Ma, Lyle J. Morris and Michael S. Chase, "China's Military Activities in the East China Sea Implications for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force" (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2018), at [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2500/RR2574/RAND\\_RR2574.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2574/RAND_RR2574.pdf). Accessed on September 9, 2020.

led to widespread mass protests and vandalism against Japanese property in China.<sup>29</sup> After two weeks of squabbling, Japan released the captain,<sup>30</sup> but Chinese intrusion into the area continues.<sup>31</sup>

**Fig. 2: Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Median Line**



Source: Daniel Sullivan, "21st Century East Asia: A Case Study of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Dispute", p. 3, at <http://www.danielallansullivan.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Senkaku-Diaoyu-Island-Dispute-History-and-Future.pdf>

The parties to the dispute have put forward different principles of international law to support their claims. If the median line is demarcated legally, then the entire Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands and part of the Xihu

29. "China: Anti-Japanese Protests Grow in Dispute Over Island Chain", *The New York Times*, October 18, 2010. Accessed on December 20, 2020.  
 30. "Japan Frees Chinese Boat Captain amid Diplomatic Row", *BBC*, September 24, 2010, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-11403241>. Accessed on September 26, 2020  
 31. "Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response", as of November 2020, Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000465486.pdf>. Accessed on September 13, 2020.

Trough (area of maximum hydrocarbon deposits in the ECS) would lie on the Japanese side of the line (see Fig. 2). Japan considers all waters east of this “median line” to be Japanese territory, while China claims the area up to the western coastline of Okinawa Islands as its territory. If China gains sovereignty over Diaoyu Islands, they can claim rights over the continental shelf plus the EEZ to the north and east of the islands, close to Okinawa, as well as exclusive economic rights to the whole southern portion of the East China Sea, which would include the Xihu Trough in its entirety. Asserting its claim, Japan in September 2012 ‘nationalised’ the Senkaku islands by purchasing them from a private family under whose possession the islands had been for a long time.<sup>32</sup>

The main issue of the South China Sea is the dispute over the sovereignty of Paracel and Spratly, and other islands and reefs between China and some of the Southeast Asian countries. To sustain its claims of around 90 per cent of the waterbody of the SCS, China relies on the U-shaped line of 1947.<sup>33</sup> China annexed Paracel Islands in 1974 just before the fall of Saigon, and the Spratly islands in 1988 by defeating the Vietnamese navy. Again, in 1994, it took control of the Mischief Reef from the Philippines when the US closed its Subic naval base in the Philippines. After that China followed a policy of restraint and signed Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea with the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2002. But when the sovereignty issue came up in the United Nations, China formally submitted a U-shaped nine-dash line in 2009 claiming around 90 per cent of the waterbody (see Fig. 3). Since then it has adopted assertive actions which include the Scarborough Shoal incident with the Philippines in 2012, the oil rig incident with Vietnam in 2014, and large-scale land reclamation and island building adjacent to the Spratly groups. Since July 2016 China has focused on diplomacy to resolve the issue and negotiations have been under way over a code of conduct (COC), which is yet to be finalised.

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32. “Five years after nationalization of the Senkaku Islands”, in *The Japan Times*, September 11, 2017, at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/09/11/editorials/five-years-nationalization-senkaku-islands/>. Accessed on September 17, 2020.

33. Feng Zhang, “China’s long march at sea: explaining Beijing’s South China Sea strategy, 2009-2016”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2020, pp. 757-87.

Fig. 3: China's U-shaped Line and Disputed Territories in the SCS



Source: "Focus on Territorial Disputes: South China Sea", in *The Diplomatic Envoy*, March 23, 2016, at <http://blogs.shu.edu/thediplomaticenvoy/2016/03/23/focus-on-territorial-disputes-south-china-sea/>

### CHINESE CONSOLIDATION OF THE NEAR SEAS

China's near seas strategy has two objectives: short-term and long-term. The short-term strategy is focused on crisis management, while the long-term strategy is full Chinese control of both ECS and SCS, which is integral to China's grand strategy of emerging as a maritime great power by the middle of the 21st century. Since near seas are associated with sovereignty, sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs) protection, and great power politics, a major conflict leading to losing control of territory would impact China's regime security in terms of state legitimacy. A major conflict in the waters would also lead to US intervention in the conflict, much to the discomfort

of China as it will escalate into a direct US-China confrontation; and so avoiding Washington's direct intervention in a local crisis is the main objective of short-term strategy. China is progressively upping the ante to avoid unwanted ramifications in the dispute but to respond aggressively to the other parties' countermeasures. China claims that its actions are reactive in nature, not as an initiator of the conflict. It protects its interests in the disputes and deprives others of gaining any advantage over China. You Ji argues that "reactive assertiveness and avoidance of further standoff are two sides of a coin in Beijing's policy towards maritime disputes that serve multiple purposes: primarily for domestic consumption, for deterring further moves by other disputants, and for maintaining peace for negotiations to restore the status quo".<sup>34</sup> The reactive assertiveness is a controlled escalation strategy aimed at preventing US intervention and avoiding a major military clash with other regional states. China believes that if the US does not lend its support to other claimants, or is hesitant to intervene directly in a 'local' crisis, then China will have a larger room for manoeuvring than other disputants in regional matters. Throughout the period China followed a strategy of dispute control mechanism through "assertiveness short of military conflict" that allows Beijing maximum policy space for manoeuvring.<sup>35</sup>

Since 2008, China has begun an assertive strategy in its maritime rights and interests in the near seas. The 2008 global financial crisis had affected the US' economy badly which caused Chinese elites to believe that it would take some time for the US to recover from the economic crisis and till then its attention would be towards domestic problems. So China could utilise this opportunity to safeguard its interests and enhance its 'consolidation' of the near seas by negating the rights of others in competitive disputes.<sup>36</sup>

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34. You Ji, "Deciphering Beijing's Maritime Security Policy and Strategy in Managing Sovereignty Disputes in the China Sea", *RSIS Policy Brief*, October 1, 2013, RSIS, NTU, Singapore, at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/216-deciphering-beijings-maritime/#.XifmUdR97Gg>. Accessed on September 25, 2020.

35. Feng Zhang, "China's long march at sea: explaining Beijing's South China Sea Strategy, 2009-2016". *The Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2020, pp. 757-87.

36. M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2011, pp. 292-319.

**Unification of Taiwan with the mainland and safeguarding rights and interests in other territorial disputes is not only an issue of sovereignty but also the legitimacy of the Communist Party.**

The territorial disputes in the near seas are part of the 'great historical mission' that the current and previous governments have been searching for as a national strategy. Unification of Taiwan with the mainland and safeguarding rights and interests in other territorial disputes is not only an issue of sovereignty but also the legitimacy of the Communist Party. Regaining lost territory and converting China into a great power is the central principle of the national rejuvenation process that President Xi unveiled in 2013.<sup>37</sup> Losing maritime territories in the SCS and ECS will affect the unification of Taiwan. "Losing these regions implies that China will lack the basic space for ensuring national political and economic security that will be essential to China's rise as a great power."<sup>38</sup> It seeks to enforce its expansive claims in the E/SCS which is a major requirement for establishing pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific region. China believes that if it cannot protect its interests in the near seas then other disputants will demand more from China, including the Himalayan border.

Initially, there was no consensus among the Chinese elites as to whether higher priority should be given to defending sovereign and maritime rights or to maintain regional stability in pursuance of its 'peaceful development' theory. An active foreign policy for defending rights would escalate tensions with other regional countries that would hamper China's peaceful image. In doing so, China sought a balancing approach in its territorial disputes right from their inception. More precisely, the actions and deliberations over the policy of the balancing act have varied according to China's national priorities and international security environment. After the 1998 Spratly incident, China adopted a policy of 'moderation' in territorial disputes in consonance with its economic reform to maintain a "stable and peaceful external environment", which became the guiding principle of the foreign policy of China that

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37. Friso M. S. Stevens, "China's long march to national rejuvenation: toward a Neo-Imperial order in East Asia?" in *Asian Security*, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2020.1739651

38. Ibid.



continued up to 2008 when China started more assertive actions in SCS matters.<sup>39</sup> During this period, though China seized Mischief Reef in 1994, it focused more on diplomacy and signed a series of agreements with ASEAN, making a 'harmonious' relationship with them. This included both DOC and China-ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation signed in 2002, and a series of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>40</sup>

During the Hu Jintao period, demands for more assertive actions to protect China's interests in the maritime domain came up, but his focus was to maintain stability at least till the 2008 Olympics. Criticisms levelled against Hu increased for his alleged policy of "sacrificing China's rights for the sake of stability".<sup>41</sup> After 2008, various maritime agencies expanded their activities into the SCS, which include the China Marine Surveillance (CMS), China Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC), the Maritime Safety Administration of the Ministry of Transport, the China Maritime Police (CMP) of the Ministry of Public Security, and the Maritime Anti-Smuggling Bureau of the General Administration of Customs.<sup>42</sup> Their actions were intended to prevail in defending rights over maintaining stability in the SCS.<sup>43</sup> They emphasised that China's self-restraint has been exploited by other claimants at the cost of China so their actions were to protect the sovereignty and maritime rights in accordance with historical missions and objectives.

When Xi Jinping took over the presidentship in 2013, he sought to reverse Hu's stability focused foreign policy with a more assertive stance on the

**During the Hu Jintao period, demands for more assertive actions to protect China's interests in the maritime domain came up, but his focus was to maintain stability at least till the 2008 Olympics.**

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39. Zhang, "China's long march at sea", n. 33.

40. Min-Hua Chiang, "China-ASEAN economic relations after establishment of free trade area", in *The Pacific Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 267-90.

41. Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China's South China Sea policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 4, pp. 869-90.

42. Zhang, "China's long march at sea", n. 33.

43. Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and Self-restraint", n. 41.

disputes. He showed keen interest in foreign affairs intending to safeguard rights and interests and promoting Chinese power across the region.<sup>44</sup> In the study session meeting of the politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in July 2013, Xi succinctly expressed his administration's strategy on maritime issues that involved "resolutely safeguarding maritime rights and interests", while simultaneously "valuing the harmony between mankind and sea."<sup>45</sup> During Hu's time, there was no coordination between multiple agencies involved in the administrative matters of SCS, which resulted in frequent friction with other disputants. Xi's major move was to restructure the administrative mechanism and he has taken the leadership role in this. Under his stewardship China Coast Guard Administration was set up, integrating four maritime law agencies, with the responsibility of maritime patrol in the SCS.<sup>46</sup> Besides, the national Maritime Affairs Committee was formed under his leadership, which provides overall leadership in strengthening inter-agency coordination.

In 2009, CCP had modified late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's dictum of low-profile foreign policy narrative into "continuing to keep a low profile and proactively attaining achievement" in the context of exploiting opportunities emerging out of the post-2008 financial crisis.<sup>47</sup> However, President Xi, at the Conference on Periphery Diplomacy organised by CCP Central Committee in 2013, called for progressive diplomacy to promote Chinese interests and used the term 'striving for achievement' as the new directive of Chinese foreign policy.<sup>48</sup> Though the ways and means for 'striving for achievement' were not clearly delineated, it was clear that a major objective was to pursue an assertive posture to ensure a 'consolidation' of Chinese claims in the SCS. It was articulated that China would not be hesitant to use armed forces to

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44. Avery Goldstein, "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance", in *International Security*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2020, pp. 164-201.

45. Sukjoon Yoon, "Xi Jinping's 'True Maritime Power' and ESCS Issues", in *Chinese Journal of International Law*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2014, pp. 887-889

46. Linda Jakobson, "China's unpredictable maritime security actors". Lowy Institute, December 2014, at [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/chinas-unpredictable-maritime-security-actors\\_3.pdf](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/chinas-unpredictable-maritime-security-actors_3.pdf). Accessed on July 30, 2020.

47. Ling Wei, "Striving for achievement in a new era: China debates its global role", in *The Pacific Review*, vol. 3, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 413-37.

48. Ibid.

safeguard its interests if the other parties resorted to pursuing coercive methods in the dispute.<sup>49</sup> From around 2005 onwards, PLAN used to conduct regular naval exercises in the SCS and maintaining a small number of vessels that were permanently “on station” in the Spratlys, including Fiery Cross and Mischief Reef to promote the consolidation strategy.<sup>50</sup> For Xi, without taking a more assertive position in the maritime disputes, it would not be able to achieve the historical mission that Mao and other forefathers had envisioned for elevating China into the league of great powers. As China became the largest naval power in the Asian region, while US military influence declined in its capacity to control the outcome of a regional conflict, the leadership in China felt that an opportunity had arrived to propel Chinese power further. China had already shown its resolve in the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012, it had withstood Manila’s efforts to control the shoal and eventually taken it over from the Philippines.<sup>51</sup> The US was reluctant to involve itself in the Scarborough Shoal stand-off when the Philippines sought a security guarantee from the US if China were to use its naval force; instead, the US did not approve it. Indeed, China focused on capitalising on the US’ unwillingness to intervene in a ‘local crisis’ to consolidate its position in the SCS. At the same time, China was concerned about further escalation of tension because that would lead to a major armed conflict, inviting the US into the crisis which would become a direct confrontation between the two; rather, China sought to control the situation within its ambit. Also, China had strategically curtailed the cohesiveness of ASEAN countries to reconcile to Chinese aggression in the SCS; none of the regional countries had taken a strong position against Chinese actions in the Scarborough Shoal incident and that provided more ammunition to the Chinese armoury for further actions in the SCS.

In fact, throughout the 2000s, PLA Navy had sought to expand its wings far into the SCS with island-building proposals but this did not get

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49. Ibid.

50. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea”; also see Derek Grossman, “Military Build-Up in the South China Sea”, in Leszek Buszynski and Do Thanh Hai (eds.), *The South China Sea: From a Regional Maritime Dispute to a Geostrategic Competition* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

51. Zhang, n. 33.

approval from the government on the grounds that it would affect China's regional standing.<sup>52</sup> When Xi took over, however, he gave the go-ahead for the PLA Navy to the building of military infrastructures, including land reclamations, in the SCS.<sup>53</sup> Since then, PLAN has increased its activities in the SCS, utilising the advantage of the Scarborough Shoal incident, and got more area under its control. Between 2013 and 2015, Beijing initially pursued industrial-scale land reclamation and island-building in the areas under its control, and then installed military and civilian facilities in the artificial islands. More than 2,900 acres of land were reclaimed during this period.<sup>54</sup> "Each of the three largest islands—Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef—now have hangars for fighter aircraft, fixed-weapons positions, barracks, administration buildings, and communication facilities."<sup>55</sup> "They can eventually house up to three regiments of fighters. On each of its four smaller islands—Johnson, Gaven, Hughes, and Cuarteron Reefs—are fixed, land-based naval guns and improved communications infrastructure."<sup>56</sup> "Substantial upgrades of military infrastructure have also taken place in the Paracel Islands."<sup>57</sup> "The largest islands in both the Spratlys and Paracels are now capable of deploying advanced fighter aircraft and surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missiles".<sup>58</sup>

China felt that the regional and global environment was conducive to increasing its assertive actions in the SCS. Around a decade of 'moderation'

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52. Ibid.

53. J. Perez, "Prospect of Philippine thaw slows China's plans in South China Sea", in *New York Times*, September 24, 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/asia/philippines-south-china-sea.html>. Accessed on October 12, 2020.

54. B. Dolven, J. K. Elsea, S. V. Lawrence, R. O'Rourke and I. E. Rinehart, "Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options", (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 18, 2015), at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44072.pdf>. Accessed on October 15, 2020.

55. Zhang, n. 33.

56. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Build it and they will come", August 1, 2016, at <https://amti.csis.org/build-it-and-they-will-come/>. Accessed on October 14, 2020.

57. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China's New Spratly Island Defences", December 13, 2016, at <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-new-spratlyisland-defenses/>. Accessed on October 17, 2020.

58. Steven Stashwick, "China's South China Sea militarization has peaked", in *Foreign Policy*, August 19, 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/19/chinas-south-china-sea-militarization-has-peaked/>. Accessed on October 20, 2020.

strategy contributed a high premium for China as it helped to defuse the concerns of ASEAN about China's rapid military modernisation. Similarly, China believed that a rare window of opportunity to gather strategic gain had arrived as the US' preoccupation with the Middle East and Russia would divert its attention from the South China Sea. The land reclamation and military infrastructure—especially in the Parcel island groups—would strategically benefit China as it was close to the international sea lanes connecting the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. Despite its control of a major part of the water body, China has neither promulgated any order to regulate the shipping activities nor used naval ships for law enforcement. So far, Beijing has not permanently deployed PLA Navy or PLA Air Force forces to the forward operating bases of the Spratlys and Paracels.<sup>59</sup> The strengthening of its existing facilities with HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles and J-11 fighter jets on Woody Island is part of China's sea denial strategy rather than incremental militarisation of the SCS.<sup>60</sup>

Although China has the capability to exercise regular forces to exert its position in the SCS, it has conspicuously decided to avoid using PLA to defend its sovereign rights in the SCS. The Chinese strategy is to alter the status quo in the SCS without triggering a major conflict. China's strategy can be described as a 'grey-zone' coercive strategy, which is "an effort or series of efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one's security objectives without resort to direct or sizable use of force".<sup>61</sup> The United States Department of Defence describes it as "an opportunistically timed progression of incremental but intensifying steps to attempt to increase effective control over disputed areas and avoid escalation to the

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59. Derek Grossman, "Military Build-Up in the South China Sea" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/external\\_publications/EP68058.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP68058.html). Accessed on October 12, 2020.

60. Katherine Morton, "China's Ambition in the South China Sea: Is a Legitimate Maritime Order Possible?", *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2016, pp. 909-40.

61. M. Green, K. Hicks, Z. Cooper, J. Schaus and J. Douglas, "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, p. 21, at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170505\\_GreenM\\_CounteringCoercionAsia\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170505_GreenM_CounteringCoercionAsia_Web.pdf). Accessed on September 29, 2020.

**On the one hand, China continues its assertive actions in the SCS through land reclamation and coercive tactics, while, on the other, it has in parallel focused on maintaining regional stability, reassuring the regional countries that China still favours 'cooperation and harmony' and not hegemony.**

military conflict".<sup>62</sup> The grey-zone conflict comes third in the hierarchy of warfare: nuclear, conventional, and grey-zone conflict.<sup>63</sup> Beijing calculates that the grey-zone conflict strategy suits its interests well because China lacks the military capabilities to win over the US in battle if the US were directly involved in a crisis.<sup>64</sup> Instead, China has used its maritime militias—known as the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), a government-supported armed fishing force operating under the patronage of the Chinese Coast Guard and PLA Navy in the SCS<sup>65</sup>—to scare away the fishermen of other countries. Since no regular force is

used, it will be difficult for the US and its allies to mobilise their forces against China in such conflicts.

On the one hand, China continues its assertive actions in the SCS through land reclamation and coercive tactics, while, on the other, it has in parallel focused on maintaining regional stability, reassuring the regional countries that China still favours 'cooperation and harmony' and not hegemony.<sup>66</sup> In September 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time agreed to begin the Code of Conduct consultations with ASEAN.<sup>67</sup> To maintain stability

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62. United States Department of Defense, "Annual report to congress: Military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China 2017" (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), p. 12, at [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017\\_China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report.PDF](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF). Accessed on October 8, 2020.

63. Zack Cooper and Andrew Shearer, "Thinking clearly about China's layered Indo-Pacific strategy", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 73, no. 5, 2017, pp. 305-11.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Gregory Poling, "China's Hidden Navy", in *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/25/chinas-secret-navy-spratlys-southchinasea-chinesenavy-maritimemilitia/>. Accessed on October 17, 2020.

66. Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement", in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2014, p. 153-84.

67. C. A. Thayer, "ASEAN, China, and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea", in *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2013, pp. 75-84.

in the SCS and to avoid US participation in the SCS affairs, China proposed a “dual-track” approach by undertaking peaceful means to resolve the dispute without resorting to the threat or use of force and conduct consultations and negotiations by the states directly concerned.<sup>68</sup> After taking control of strategic locations that the PLA Navy felt important in the SCS to maintain its supremacy as well as to ensure its “active defence strategy that would help to implement a sea denial strategy”, China deliberately took a policy of ‘self-restraint’ in its ‘defending rights’

**After taking control of strategic locations that the PLA Navy felt important in the SCS to maintain its supremacy as well as to ensure its “active defence strategy that would help to implement a sea denial strategy”, China deliberately took a policy of ‘self-restraint’ in its ‘defending rights’ approach.**

approach. A ‘self-restraint’ strategy is necessary to counter the criticism of Chinese hegemony in the SCS. Continuous assertive actions would lead to the coming together of the regional countries against China that Beijing least wants to see. Regional cohesiveness is as threatening as US military might, in that the regional countries may openly ally with the US against China if Beijing continued its aggressiveness. After the annexation of disputed territories, it is conspicuously avoiding using force for law enforcement actions; instead, it has used PAFMM in its assertive tactics.<sup>69</sup> PAFMM harassment of other countries’ fishermen close to their home waters sometimes leads to a ‘warning shot’ by other navies. For instance, in June 2016, in response to PAFMM harassment of Indonesian fishing trawlers near the Natuna Islands, controlled by Indonesia but comes within the 9-dash line, the Indonesian Navy fired warning shots, leading to injury of a

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68. *People’s Daily*, “China insists on ‘dual-track’ approach to resolving South China Sea issues”, November 18, 2014, at <http://en.people.cn/n/2014/1118/c98649-8810382.html>. Accessed on November 2, 2020.

69. James Kraska, “China’s Maritime Militia Vessels May Be Military Objectives During Armed Conflict”, in *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/chinas-maritime-militia-vessels-may-be-military-objectives-during-armed-conflict/>. Accessed on October 30, 2020.

Chinese person.<sup>70</sup> In May 2020, Chinese fishing boats escorted by the Chinese Coast Guard had skirmishes with Indonesian fishermen in the Natuna area that the Indonesian fishermen alleged the Chinese were encroaching on their territory. However, Indonesia played down incursions by Chinese fishing boats into their area to avoid conflict with Beijing over the disputed territory.<sup>71</sup> China utilises its upper hand in the disputes, while regional countries are wary of raising the Chinese aggressiveness or standing up to China because of their economic dependence on China.

Through assertiveness and provocative tactics that limit the disputant's claims over the territory, Chinese consolidation of the SCS has been complete. Chinese strategy now seems to focus on 'regional stability', while enhancing its rights and interests over the disputes.<sup>72</sup> And, for that, China has initiated a 'regional development' mechanism aimed at reducing its tensions with Southeast Asian countries and taking a leadership role in the region. Along with the 'dual-track' diplomatic initiative, China announced the Maritime Silk Road concept, later the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Maritime Silk Road Fund, and, in August 2016, China and ASEAN agreed to launch consultations on a 'binding' code of conduct in the SCS.<sup>73</sup> They formally launched negotiations on the code of conduct in November 2017. This has not stopped its assertive actions in the SCS, in lieu of promoting regional stability, and has steadily worked to enhance its physical presence in the areas under its effective control. A regional stability mechanism would alleviate any future resistance from the regional countries against Chinese actions in the SCS. However, it may further lead to converting the SCS into a 'China lake' in the future.

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70. "Indonesian Navy Fires on Chinese Boat Injures Fisherman—Beijing Ministry", Reuters, June 19, 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-indonesia-ship-idUSL4N19B074>. Accessed on November 4, 2020.

71. "China Chases Indonesia's Fishing Fleets, Staking Claim to Sea's Riches", in *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/world/asia/Indonesia-south-china-sea-fishing.html>. Accessed on November 5, 2020.

72. Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and Self-restraint", n. 41.

73. Lee Ying Hui, "A South China Sea Code of Conduct: Is Real Progress Possible?", in *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/a-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct-is-real-progress-possible/>. Accessed on November 4, 2020.



Complete Chinese control of the SCS would indeed severely affect not only the sovereign rights of other Southeast Asian countries but also the freedom of navigation connecting the Pacific with the Indian Ocean. The international community has already raised its concern about Chinese control of the SCS.<sup>74</sup> Besides, once China takes control of the SCS, it will gradually expand its assertive positions in the western Pacific as well as the Indian Ocean region.

## CONCLUSION

Near seas belong to the first line of defence in China's security calculations. Preventing threats from reaching the adjacent waters has been integral to the 'active offshore' defence strategy. The active defence strategy ensures the security of the Chinese mainland and aims to prevent the US navy from getting access in the near seas to curtail the US navy's manoeuvrability in the western Pacific. With two decades of focused naval modernisation programme, China has achieved a full spectrum sea denial capability in the near seas area. Since the East China Sea dispute involves Japan and Taiwan—both are US defence partners—China has not adopted the same kind of coercive tactics that it has in the South China Sea disputes. It has gradually enhanced its presence from initially exploiting the opportunities opened up by UNCLOS mechanisms; then the 'moderation' strategy aimed to strengthen its relationship with the Southeast Asian countries; and finally to the Chinese consolidation of the waterbodies. During this process, it focused on being seen as a non-threatening power, and an acceptable and legitimate power in the region, both economically as well as militarily. Its initial strategy of primacy to maintaining regional stability rather than defending rights paid dividends so that China became an integral part of all regional multilateral institutions. This has become a base for the Chinese consolidation of the near seas.

The gradual and steady 'consolidation' in the SCS by China has left other disputants unnerved. China has exploited the US' predicament in involving

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74. Alexander Neill, "South China Sea: What's China's plan for its 'Great Wall of Sand'?", *BBC*, July 14, 2018, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53344449>. Accessed on November 9, 2020.

itself in a 'local' crisis in SCS, which is considered of much less strategic significance (for the US) compared to the Middle East. This has emboldened the Chinese position in the SCS but weakened other disputants to stand up against China. The regional stability mechanism helps China in the continuation of its consolidation, marginalising the legitimate claim of other disputants and lowering any resistance from the regional countries. Without the firm support of Southeast Asian countries, no regional mechanism to counter China would work. China wants to control the SCS waterbody which would give a firm footing in its periphery to convert China into a 'true maritime power'. Since threat through the near seas was considered an existential threat to China, consolidation of the near seas has helped Beijing to focus on other existing disputes such as Himalayan border dispute with India, which is now under way. Consolidation of the near seas has been a major boost for Beijing because it can now singly focus on the Himalayan border issue without hindrance.