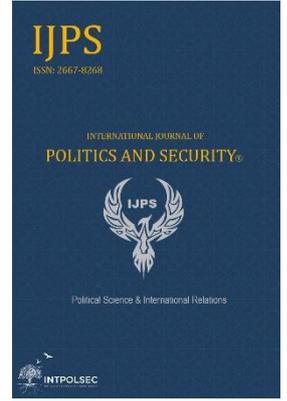


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‘Historical Mistake’ and the USA - China Global Rivalry: The South China Sea Dispute

Buğrahan BİCAN*

ABSTRACT

China has been facing various border disputes with the neighboring countries in the Far East. Among them is the “South China Sea Dispute” which has become the leading dispute of the region in recent years whereby China’s acts with a sovereignty claim on the South China Sea Islands and the borders in the surrounding area led to the participation of neighboring states into the conflict. It is understood that the South China Sea dispute is becoming a predominant issue not only on a regional scale but also a power struggle between the USA and China in that it is a multidimensional problem with its geopolitical-geostrategic, legal, and military pillars. The aim of this research explain the multilayered features of the South China Sea dispute with the rivalry between the USA and China in the background.

Keywords: South China Sea, Geostrategy, Power Struggle, China, United States of America.

1. Introduction

The South China Sea is in the south of China and it is a landlocked sea. It is surrounded by the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Its natural borders are set by the Malacca Strait in the west, and the Strait of Taiwan in the east. It is separated from the Indian Ocean by the Malacca Strait.¹ According to the Stavridis, like Sicily in the Mediterranean, Taiwan, which has a very strategic location in the South China Sea, is located directly opposite the sea routes of Korea, Japan, China, and other countries in the South. According to that; this position might have caused Mahan to interpret it as a "supply port base".² It is evident that it has a significant position in international trade, and not only in terms of the regional countries, due to the 5.3 trillion dollar trade volume in the South China Sea. In addition, according to the USA Energy Association, South China’s potential does not only stem from trade; with its natural gas reserve of 4 – 5 billion cubic meters as well as 11 billion cubic meters of oil, it has an important geo-strategic and economic potential on behalf of the surrounding countries as well as the global energy market. Nevertheless, China has become the “highest energy consuming country of the world”, outpacing the USA in 2010. In a country where production and export are the driving forces behind growth, it is needless to

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¹ Eugene LaFond, “South China Sea”, Britannica.com, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-China-Sea/> (02.11.2022).

²James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World Oceans*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017, 259.



say that the need for required energy to manufacture also increases by extension. As the world leader in production,³ China's leading position in energy requirements is inevitable.⁴

The aforementioned significance of the South China Sea has created a conflict in terms of sharing prosperous energy resources based on the fact that both China and the neighboring states are looking after their strategic as well as commercial interests. The South China Sea conflict has a singular meaning and significance as part directly of the global USA – China competition and of the conflicting states' being allies of the USA in terms of establishing the security of the region as an international trade route, and this is beyond the national interests of the neighboring countries. Thus, the USA could not remain unresponsive to the developments in the region for so long, and in particular, the navy started to show the flag in the region.⁵ At this point, Brands and Gaddis highlight the remarkable geographic and geopolitical differences between the two powers and a remarkable matter that brought them face to face. They state that even though a "continental shift" would be at stake that would not be realized in the near future. They lay down the position of the "hybrid hegemon" USA which is a "naval force" enjoying the advantages of its geography surrounded by oceans on both sides⁶ against the "geo-strategical security dilemma" of China which is essentially a "land force" surrounded by "discontented" neighbours.⁷ This "dualist approach" calls up the "naval- land force" dilemma in geopolitically founded theories that were developed by different opinions and interpretations by scholars such as Spykman and Dugin⁸ starting with Mackinder.

³ "Leading export countries worldwide in 2020", Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264623/leading-export-countries-worldwide/> (02.10.2022); Yoshifumi Tanaka, *The South China Sea Arbitration: Toward an International Legal Order in the Oceans*. London: Hart Publishing, 2019, 1-3.

⁴ Kamer Kasım, "Güney Çin Denizi'nde ÇHÇ-ABD Rekabeti", Türk Asya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (TASAM), 30 Mayıs 2018, https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/50253/guney_cin_denizinde_chc-abd_rekabeti/ (03.11.2022).

⁵ Sam LaGrone, "7th Fleet CO: Deployed LCS USS Gabrielle Giffords 'Pretty Much Owned' South China Sea", U.S. Naval Institute (USNI), <https://news.usni.org/2021/05/27/7th-fleet-co-deployed-lcs-uss-gabrielle-giffords-pretty-much-owned-south-china-sea/> (03.10.2022).

⁶ Gerard Dorel, *Atlas de l'Empire Américain*. Autrement: Atlas/Monde, 2006, 8-17.

⁷ Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "America, China and the Echoes of History", *Foreign Affairs* 100, No: 6, (2021): 10, 12.

⁸ Dugin states that the geopolitical structure has changed in the current "multipolar" system and that "Atlanticism" has come to an end, and that "Heartlands" (North America-Latin America-Europe-Russia-Islam-Arab-Africa-India-Oceania-China) have emerged to form 10 different blocks. that this is a "mandatory" model resulting from the existence of a "multipolar" system; He states that the "American Heartland" can exist together in an ecosystem without the need to be positioned as opposed to other "Heartlands" in the multipolar system. Alexander Dugin, "DUGIN: The End Of Atlanticism And The Rise Of The Heartlands", 14.03.2019, Fort-russ.com, <https://fort-russ.com/2019/03/dugin-the-end-of-atlanticism-and-the-rise-of-the-heartlands/> (10.11.2022).



The “sovereignty rights” claims by China that brought it face to face with the USA after exhibiting a “hegemonic” position⁹ in the region, and which caused it to have a political-geographical-legal conflict with its neighbors specific to the South China Sea are, in fact, based on a historic map consisting of 11 dash lines based on 1947. Following the Communist administration taking control, China decreased the 11-dash lines to 9-dash lines¹⁰ and claimed a “historical” sovereignty right on the South China Sea with a line starting from the western coasts of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei. Currently, the Beijing administration claims sovereignty rights on the “semi-circle” formed region that falls in the west of the nine-dash line that had been drawn. The regions of conflict are primarily Spratly and Paracel Islands, Natuna, and Pratas Islands as well as Scarborough Shoal.¹¹ The practices of China, unable to settle the problem with neighboring countries diplomatically in the region, as well the USA’s support to its ally states in the region that are in dispute with China, and the military agreements between them carried the conflict that had once been “regional” to a “global level”¹² having been evolved into the USA-China rivalry. In this respect, the South China Sea can be expressed as the boiling “Asia’s Cauldron”, in Kaplan's interpretation.¹³

2. The USA – China Global Competition – A Theoretical Perspective

The increasing global rivalry between the USA and China is explained under this title with the spectrum of Realists’ theories. In addition, the USA and its competitor China's moves are examined to demonstrate their policies in the current and historical process.

2.1. From a unipolar system to a multipolar system: China’s Effort to “Stabilize Power”

The world’s history has always faced a recurrent struggle between the “rising power” and the power that established the present status quo. Historically, it is seen that 11 out of 15

⁹Kissinger states that starting from the "Open Door" policy of the USA and the Russian-Japanese war mediation process of the Roosevelt era, American policies are aimed at preventing the formation of hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region: Henry Kissinger, *World Order*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2015, 233.

¹⁰Tanaka, *ibid.*, 50; Stavridis, *ibid.*, 261; Kamer Kasım, *ibid.*, p. 1-2.

¹¹Klaus Heinrich Raditio, *Understanding China’s Behaviour in the South China Sea*. Singapore: Palgrave&Macmillan, 2019, 1-6; Cemre Pekcan, “Güney Çin Denizi Sorunu Çerçevesinde Çin-Hindistanİlişkileri”, *ÇOMÜ Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 1, sy. 1 (2016): 20; Kamer Kasım, *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹² Henry Kissinger, *On China*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012, 507, 534.

¹³Robert Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014, 295, 375.



cases had ended with a war.¹⁴ The current global competition between the USA and China that we have been experiencing during our times, yet, sets a new example to the ones that had been witnessed in history before. “The balance of power” fostered will determine whether or not it is possible to evade such a ‘*Thucydides Trap*’¹⁵ which implicates also the possibility of a war between these two powers. China is not one of the “Great Powers” of the 19th Century, and it is also not a “Super Power” of the 20th Century, nevertheless, it became the candidate that filled the “adversary gap” within the soonest – a gap that was formed in the system following, in particular, the end of the Cold War between the USA and Russia in the 21st Century and positioning of the USA as the “Global Super Power” unaccompanied. Therefore; with the passage from a “bipolar” system of the Cold War to a system where the USA is the “single pole” – a system which is not likely to be kept in equilibrium for a long time – and with Russia gathering its strength during the 2000s following the dissolution of the USSR at the end of the aforementioned process, and with China, the rising power of the Far East, entering the stage with its military and economic competition with the USA, we have now witnessed a world order which is “multipolar”.

Likewise, upon the USSR’s loss of being a “Super Power” following its dissolution, Waltz has listed China among the states that might have the possibility to balance the USA’s power globally and stated that it may be possible to “balance” by forming alliances against the sole global power remaining in the system.¹⁶ However, he also noted that even where there is a change in the “balance of power”, “anarchy” as the “most basic regularity principle” in the international system would preserve its position.¹⁷

On the other hand, Kissinger, resembling the USA’s relationship with China to Bismarck’s Europe, states that whereas the USA’s alliance with Japan, as well as its “legitimate partnership” with China, is open to enables some “flexibility”, it also constitutes a paradox¹⁸ that involves an increasing possibility of conflict and war. Kissinger states that preserving peace

¹⁴Allison Graham, “Obama and Xi Must Think Broadly to Avoid a Classic Trap”, 06.06.2013, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html> (16.11.2022).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶ Kenneth Waltz (a), “The New World Order”, *Millenium* 2, No. 2 (1993): 187 et al.

¹⁷ Kenneth Waltz (b), “The Emerging Structure of International Politics”, *International Security* 18, No. 2 (1993): 45 et al.

¹⁸Kissinger, *ibid.*, 232-233.



in the Pacific region depends on the concessions that the parties are willing to make from their goals, and their capacity to maintain their competition at the political and diplomatic level.¹⁹ Unfortunately, analyzing the recent developments in the region, it becomes evident that both parties are inclined to seek military solutions by putting policy and diplomacy on the backburner where none of the parties are giving concessions from their goals and interests in terms of the competition between them. This has come to a point where it threatens peace in the Pacific region.

Robert D. Kaplan foresees that with the falls and dissolutions following the Cold War, the world is headed to an era that will be more chaotic and full of conflict compared to the past.²⁰ In addition, John Mearsheimer, opposing the fractions who were highly optimistic about the era in the aftermath of the Cold War, stated that the Cold War period, that is to say, the bipolar system was, in fact, more stable; and added that a more “precarious” climate evolved with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Bipolar systems or systems with two major powers are the most reliable formations in terms of protecting the “balance of power”, and they are more durable than unipolar systems or systems with one great power. Whereas, in unipolar systems, potential rivals that would threaten the great power will inevitably arise; and the unipolar system is, by nature, inclined to collapse. Moreover, Mearsheimer states that it is important to take measures “that would increase one's power and decrease the power of one's competitors” to produce a successful security policy during such periods. On the other hand, Mearsheimer, being an “offensive realist”, at the beginning of 2000 criticized Waltz's being a defensive realist²¹ who supported the view that the state was in defense of a perpetual “security dilemma”, and therefore it tries to maximize its power.

In the relatively “short-lived” system where the USA was positioned as the sole “global power” in the aftermath of the Cold War – just like it had been anticipated by the Realist theories - China has become a “candidate of global power” along with Russia against the USA. A thorough assessment of the “China threat” theory against its expansionist and sovereignty claims in the South China Sea would yield the outcome that it should be anticipated that China,

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰ Robert Kaplan, *Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of Post Cold War*. New York: Random House, 2000, 154.

²¹ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton & Company, 2001, 18-19.



being dissatisfied with the status quo of the global system led by the USA, would eventually rise against the “hegemonic” USA as the “rising power”. This anticipation is based both on Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski’s “Power Transition”²² theory and Mearsheimer’s “offensive realism”²³ neo-realist explanations. Therefore, we can suffice to say that the “unipolar” system led by the USA- the East is faced with a global challenge of China and Russia. China²⁴ which uses its large volume of accumulated capital and the increased wealth converted into military power to dominate Asia is acting just as predicted by Realism. According to Mearsheimer, the “direct threat” created by China will inevitably bring competition and conflict. The key aspect here is the speed and scope of the extraordinary rise of China. The policymakers in the USA, during the unipolar period, dealt with the issue from the vire of balance of power politics, and they tried to slow down the growth of China, and aimed at maximizing the difference in power between Beijing and Washington. Nevertheless, as China enriched, the USA-China cold war became inevitable. Entering into a commitment/ liability may be the worst “strategic error” made by any country in recent years. Correspondingly, he states that there is no precedent in history where a great power actively encouraged the rise of a comparable rival and that it is too late to do anything about it.²⁵ At this point, it is possible to observe that the USA is carrying out a kind of "containment" policy both at the regional and global level against the inevitable rise of China. From this point of view, it is remarkable that "China's stated ambitions and coercive policies" are interpreted as a “challenger” against the US-led West’s interests, security, and values in NATO's 2022 strategic document.²⁶ Thus, this approach continues in NATO’s 2023 report. While Russia was interpreted as the “most immediate and direct threat”, China was classified as a “challenger” under some titles against NATO: technological fields (cyberattacks, 5G/6G infrastructure, Quantum, etc.), investments & economic dependencies (Belt and Road

²² Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski, *World Politics*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1968, 104 et al.

²³ John Mearsheimer, *ibid.*, 18 et al.

²⁴ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*. London & New York: Verso, 2007, 203-204, 283-284, 287 et al.

²⁵ John Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics”, *Foreign Affairs* 100, No. 6 (2021): 48, 50.

²⁶“NATO Strategic Concepts”, 18.07.2022, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm (22.07.2022).



Initiative [BRI]²⁷), maritime claims, China-Russia cooperation, Indo-Pacific conflict issue, China's nuclear capacity, China's humanitarian and diplomatic practices.²⁸

When it is focused on the South China Sea at the regional level, it can be seen clearly USA and its allies containment policy with new agreements/pacts. One of the most recent of these is the AUKUS agreement which was announced on 15 September 2021.²⁹ This is a trilateral agreement between US, UK, and Australia which includes sharing "classified" (Article 5/A) and "unclassified" (Article 5/B) information/know-how (consisting of research, development, design, manufacture, operation, regulate, and dispose of military reactors, facilitate communication & exchange) about nuclear powered (propulsion or more accurately; nuclear-powered but armed with conventional – not nuclear - submarines) submarines (Article 2)³⁰ to assist Australia in acquiring them.

Even if the word "China" is nowhere in the text, it is possible to say that the idea behind the agreement is forming an alliance against the Chinese power in the region. Although the text refers to the Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) provisions regarding the peaceful means of nuclear activities (Article 4/C), China opposes the sale of nuclear submarines (information) by saying that it is a clear violation of the object and purpose of the NPT and they said that this "intensifies the arms race" in the region.³¹

²⁷ European Union launched labelled as "Global Gateway" projects which aims at mobilizing up to 300billion € public and private funds by 2027 to finance EU projects abroad, to compete with China's Belt and Road initiative: Stuart Lau and Barbara Moens, "EU to launch Global Gateway projects, challenging China's Belt and Road". (20.12.2022), Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/global-gateway-european-union-launch-china-belt-and-road/> (17.08.2023).

²⁸ "Implementing NATO's Strategic Concept on China", 02.02.2023, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/implementing-natos-strategic-concept-on-china/#h-iv-implementing-nato-s-china-policy> (17.08.2023).

²⁹ "The UK, US and Australia will also seek to collaborate in cyber, quantum technologies and artificial intelligence as well as other underwater capabilities": Michael Drummond, "What is the AUKUS submarines pact between the UK, US and Australia - and why does China think it's 'highly irresponsible'?" (14.03.2023), Sky News, [https://news.sky.com/story/what-is-the-aukus-submarines-pact-between-the-uk-us-and-australia-and-why-does-china-think-its-highly-irresponsible-12833464/\(17.03.2023\)](https://news.sky.com/story/what-is-the-aukus-submarines-pact-between-the-uk-us-and-australia-and-why-does-china-think-its-highly-irresponsible-12833464/(17.03.2023)); Cybersecurity and Quantum computer technology areas has already been staged race between to Powers: Charlie Campbell, "The Future Is Already Here: Quantum computers that work exponentially faster are changing everything, including digital security", *Time* 201, No. 5-6 (2023): 48-51; "The AUKUS pact is a model for Western allies", 16.03.2023, *The Economist*, [https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/03/16/the-aukus-pact-is-a-model-for-western-allies/\(17.03.2023\)](https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/03/16/the-aukus-pact-is-a-model-for-western-allies/(17.03.2023)).

³⁰ Sam LaGrone, AUKUS Text, DocumentCloud, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21116075-2-aukus-treaty-text> (17.03.2023).

³¹ Ted Snider, "What the AUKUS sub ruckus means for regional security" (17.03.2023), Responsible Statecraft, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/17/what-the-aukus-sub-ruckus-means-for-regional-security/#:~:text=One%20day%20after%20the%20AUKUS,and%20purpose%20of%20the%20NPT.%E2%80>



Another conflictual issue is the “submarine loophole” (also it can be called the “nuclear propulsion loophole”)³² which was inserted in INFCIRC/153 (IAEA 1972) 1972. It is called the “Non-Application of Safeguards to Nuclear Material to Be Used in Non-Peaceful Activities”. According to Frank Von Hippel, this loophole causes some kind of “escape clause” for contacting parties; “*the loophole allows non-nuclear states to remove nuclear materials from IAEA monitoring for any military purpose other than the “production of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices”*”.³³

Chinese administration under Xi Jinping has recently been pursuing a much more effective – even offensive – foreign policy on both regional and global scales. The recent irreconcilable, extra-legal, offensive policies that do not refrain from projecting “hard power” regionally, if need be, are particularly highlighted in the South China Sea Problem with the neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, and the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands dispute where it confronted Japan.³⁴ Therefore, the recent foreign policies of China which threaten the global power as well as the Far East and South East Asia countries that it was in an alliance relationship, draw the USA to the region, and hence the South China Sea is being transformed into a new “stage” for the USA-China competition.

2.2. Chinese Foreign Policy in General

In its essence, the policy pursued by China in the South China Sea at present seems ironic to be at variance with the principle of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual “non-aggression”, “noninterference” in each other’s internal affairs, equality, and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence that was adopted in 1954 as a general frame.³⁵ Albeit, even the noninterference policy of China is not preventing it from making demands that prioritize and accommodates its interests from the countries with which it primarily developed

9D (29.03.2023); Drummond, ““What is the AUKUS submarines pact between the UK, US and Australia - and why does China think it's 'highly irresponsible'?”

³² Jeffrey Kaplow, “NPT’S Naval Nuclear Propulsion Loophole” in *Nuclear Rules, Not Just Rights: The NPT Reexamined* ed. Henry Sokolski (Arlington: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2017), 124.

³³ Frank Von Hippel, “Mitigating the Threat of Nuclear-Weapon Proliferation via Nuclear-Submarine Programs”, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2, No: 1 (2019): 133-134.

³⁴ Çağdaş Üngör, “Çin ve Ortadoğu: Geleceğin Küresel Gücü Bölgeye Nasıl Bakıyor?” *Küresel ve Bölgesel Güçlerin Ortadoğu Politikaları* ed. Tarık Oğuzlu, et al. (Ankara: Nobel, 2019), 86.

³⁵ James Dorsey, *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom*. Switzerland: Palgrave & Macmillan, 2018, 2.



cooperation.³⁶ Therefore, as China is inclined to be the “regional hegemon” around the South China Sea which necessitates it to be more active in the region for its direct and strategic interests, it would be naïve to expect China to pursue a peaceful and diplomatic policy. In addition; its “sovereignty struggle” against the Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia, the countries that are both allied with the USA, and are in close proximity to each other against China, renders it inevitable for China to act more “offensively” and actively.

Indeed, the most basic aim of the current Chinese foreign policies is to continue steady economic growth and political stability to strengthen the place of the Chinese Communist Party rulership in domestic politics and before the masses. The key to succeeding in this is to avoid, to the extent that possible, any international developments that may ruin stability that may support the separatist movements within China and which may threaten the “single party” rule in China. Therefore, the Chinese government is following policies towards meeting the raw material and energy needs that are at very extreme levels, primarily depending on its volume of production, with relatively low quotations and in an economic manner in order to assure economic stability.³⁷ The Chinese administration has been developing projects in this regard. One of them is the “Belt and Road Initiative”. The other, particularly within the meaning of energy oil, is its obligation to cross the oil it purchased from Middle-Eastern countries first through the (Persian) Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and then through the Strait of Malacca. These are the waters wherein the US Navy makes its presence felt. Therefore, the Chinese government assesses this situation as a “geopolitical risk” on its account. That naval trade roads and energy logistics/security pass through the waters under the control of the USA Navy is perceived as a threat or risk factor (by the Chinese government) to the economy which is the driving force behind the “Chinese Dream”³⁸ within the meaning of the growth of China, and geopolitical security within logistical meaning. Two alternatives emerge under these circumstances; it will either refrain from conflict by finding an “alternative route”³⁹ to this problem through projects such as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) or it will run the risk of confronting the USA powers allied to other neighboring South East Asia countries in the region by following more

³⁶ Çağdaş Üngör, *ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁷ Matto Dian and Silvia Menegazzi, *New Regional Initiatives in China's Foreign Policy: The Incoming Pluralism of Global Governance*. Switzerland: Palgrave & Macmillan, 2018, 74.

³⁸ Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, *Duvar*. İstanbul: İnkılap, 2017, 115.

³⁹ Çağdaş Üngör, *ibid.*, s. 88.



aggressive policies aimed at gaining the control of the South China Sea, first, to maintain the security and control of the trade-logistical routes as well as sharing the available oil – natural gas reserves.

3. Dimensions of the South China Sea Problem

South China Sea Dispute includes many layers: claims & legal disputes about islands in the region, economic dimension, and its geostrategic features. Those three dimensions should be examined in order to understand better their interconnected nature in this dispute.

3.1. Legal Dimension of the South China Sea Problem

The main legal and political dispute in the South China Sea is in four archipelagos. Accordingly, the Pratas Islands are located 200 miles south of Hong Kong, and it is disputed between China and Taiwan. Paracel Islands, on the other hand, are in the north of the South China Sea. Vietnam, China, and Taiwan claim rights on these islands (China, occupied the islands belonging to Vietnam in 1974). Scarborough Shoal/Reef is 130 miles from Luzon Island in the Philippines. This region is the subject of dispute among China, Taiwan, and the Philippines.⁴⁰

The claims of China on the South China Sea are based on its historical records. According to Chinese allegations, the respective islands in the South China Sea came under the administration of China during the Qing Dynasty, and the islands in the surrounding area of this region are marked as belonging to China in the historical maps.⁴¹

The crux of the dispute in the South China Sea is that with the islands claimed by China and the “U”-shape it takes (based on the nine-dash line), it shuts down almost the entire South China Sea to neighboring countries; and it interferes with the “*Exclusive Economic Zone*” (EEZ) of the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia.⁴² The Exclusive Economic Zone regime was established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). According to Article 57 of the UNCLOS, the exclusive economic zone means the area is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea that does not extend beyond 200 nautical miles

⁴⁰Tanaka, *ibid.*, 1-3; Pekcan, *ibid.*, 23.

⁴¹ K. Broderick, *Chinese Activities in the South China Sea: Implications for the American Pivot to Asia*. Project 2049 Institute, 2015, 1; Tanaka, *ibid.*, 48.

⁴²Keyuan Zou and Qiang Ye, “The U-Shaped Line and Its Legal Implications” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 129 et al.



from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.⁴³ Even, though an Exclusive Economic Zone is not a “zone” of the coastal country, the coast states enjoy the right to benefit from the resources in subsoil and seabed.⁴⁴ The countries have the right to the marine resources (oil, natural gas, fisheries) up to this zone, and the Exclusive Economic Zone cannot be used to create a “security area”; such that the UNCLOS also guarantees the wide-ranging/ “innocent passage” rights of naval vessels and military aircrafts.⁴⁵ At this point, the US has not ratified UNCLOS and it can be said that UNCLOS's conditions under transit passage (innocent and transit passages have some differences; while former, submarines have to navigate the surface and it does not apply to air transportation in the innocent passage, latter, submarines can navigate freely through the strait below the surface and it concerns also air transport) to another nation’s EEZ (Article 37, 38/2) are unclear, ambiguous and is open to different interpretations. Stavridis interprets this situation as allowing the US to carry out “*euphemism for spying*” activities outside its territorial waters but within the EEZ. According to him, this is the approach that gave rise to incidents involving US spy ships and aircraft in the EEZ, and such situations will continue in the disputed South China Sea.⁴⁶

According to Caceres, as far as the claims of the parties on the archipelagos in the South China Sea are concerned, there are various parameters and transactive matters related to the interpretation of history, law, politics, and even the practical acts, particularly the content of continental shelf. It is seen that the countries in dispute are trying to create “formulae” towards the enjoyment and control of the resources surrounding the islands in a manner that fits best for their interests. Whereas Article 76/8 of UNCLOS stipulates that “the claims of the coastal states regarding their national interests in the area along their continental shelves shall be limited to 200 nautical miles from their baselines”.⁴⁷ At this point, we shall analyze the differences between the continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone both in legal terms and the rights vested in the countries to exercise thereof. Accordingly, whereas Article 57 of the UNCLOS

⁴³Tanaka, *ibid.*, 75 et al.; Cihat Yayıncı, *Sorular ve Cevaplar ile Münhasır Ekonomik Bölge (MEB) Kavramı*. İstanbul: Deniz Basımevi Müdürlüğü, 2019, 9-10.

⁴⁴ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. Great Britain: Yale University Press, 2014, 289.

⁴⁵ “South China Sea”. Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/issues/south-china-sea/> (05.11.2022); Tanaka, *ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶Stavridis, p. 275.

⁴⁷ Sigfrido Burgos Caceres, *China’s Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Power and Resources*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 113.



states that the EEZ shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured; the breadth of the continental shelf is 350 nautical miles depending on the length of the seabed (UNCLOS, Article 76). Another difference between them is in the exercise of the right. The EEZ covers the continental shelf in terms of exercising its rights. Accordingly, the continental shelf grants rights to coastal states to extract process, and explore the non-living resources of the seabed and subsoil. On the other hand, the EEZ, in addition to the non-living resources in the continental shelf grants sovereign rights to the coastal state to explore, exploit, control, and protect the living organisms on the continental shelf (the body of water on the seabed).⁴⁸

On 4 November 2002, China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea”. The body of the declaration contains the commitment of the parties to 1982 UNCLOS, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and other universally recognized norms of international law. Such that, the states party to the dispute declared that they would settle all sorts of disputes without resorting to power, through reciprocal amicable settlement ways together with the signatory states of the declaration based on equity and mutual trust.⁴⁹ However, since this text is in the nature of a “declaration” in legal meaning, and since it does not entail any binding provisions, it did not provide any help to the settlement of the South China Sea problem and thus the dispute remains unsettled.

The dispute on the South China Sea between China, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian states gained a *de facto* legal dimension on 22 January 2013 when the Philippines appealed to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague against the claims of China regarding that the islands claimed by it have the status of “rocks” that do not have human habitation (thus, it cannot have the status of an island according to A. 121 of the UNCLOS; and just related to this matter is that the Philippines, arguing that Taiping island, which is one of the Spratly archipelago, is a rock is in dispute with Taiwan who argues that it is an “island” within the meaning of article 121). In substance, the motive behind the act of the Philippines is the

⁴⁸Ba Hamzah, “Malaysia and South China Sea Disputes: Applicability of International Law” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 185, 195; Cihat Yaycı, *ibid.*, 11-12.

⁴⁹Tanaka, *ibid.*, 152; Pekcan, *ibid.*, 24.



dispute with China in 2012 regarding the legal status of the Mischief Reef, which is rocky, and located only 80 nautical miles off its shores., despite the efforts, the dispute failed to be settled through diplomatic ways – a process in which the USA also participated- at the end of 2013, and that China did not change the way it acted, and continued making explorations in the region and its maritime vessels kept petrolling, are the reasons that brought the process to this level.⁵⁰

In this process, China was objecting against resorting to international jurisdiction on the matter. The matters examined by the Arbitration were the sovereignty claims of China based on “historic rights” according to Appendix 7 of the UNCLOS, the source of maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, the status of certain maritime features, and particularly the legal status of the disputed islands, and the lawfulness of certain actions by China and the sharing of the resources in the region. It must be noted that China did not take part in the Arbitration process and also it did not accept the jurisdiction of the court. The Arbitration did not recognize the “nine-dash line” of China and awarded a decision against it. At the outset, we shall state that out of 15 appeals made by the Philippines, seven were settled in its favor.

In its award of 12 July 2016 the Court found that even though it is stated that China has historic rights in the waters of the South China Sea, these rights shall not prevail where the provisions of the UNCLOS are not compatible with the EEZ, and in addition despite the establishment of the fact that in addition to the historic- traditional entitlements as it appeared in the navigation records, peoples of the other states have been benefiting from the islands in the region, no evidence could be found showing that China had historically used a special control in the region in a “privileged” position than the other states; and correspondingly that there are no legal grounds in respect of claiming a historic right in the maritime regions that fall within the “Nine-dash” line.⁵¹ However, the Chinese government stated that the final award⁵² of 12 July 2016 delivered by the Arbitration was not “binding”⁵³, and that it did not recognize the award.

⁵⁰ Caceres, *ibid.*, 75-76; Tanaka, *ibid.*, 152 et al.

⁵¹ “*The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic Of The Philippines V. The People’s Republic Of China)*”. Permanent Court of Arbitration, Press Release: 12 June 2016, pp.1-2, <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf> (02.11.2022).

⁵² “*The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)*”. Permanent Court of Arbitration [PCA], <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/> (02.11.2022).

⁵³ Raditio, *ibid.*, 106; Kamer Kasım, *ibid.*, 2.



In the aftermath of this process, China, to break its range of action that has become narrower, as well as the positioning of the Philippines, the UN, and ASEAN against it, and the legal, political, and strategical “containment” of the USA and other allied states, introduces the “Four Sha” Claim in 2017 instead of the “Nine-Dash Line” as a “fresh blood” to the problem. However, it is believed that when compared to the older doctrine, the purpose of this new doctrine is to find more legal justifications before the UNCLOS. This new doctrine, rather than assessing the islands on which China claims sovereignty as a “group of islands”, argues that they are “archipelagos integrated to the mainland territory of its state” in the framework of article 47/1,2 of the UNCLOS to claim the EEZ of each island of its own, hence claims that they constitute as “Four Sha” is part of its extended continental shelf. As a matter of fact, China’s doctrine is not a new claim, and it is observed to be articulated to provide a legal justification for its claim of a “nine-dash line” that was without legal basis.⁵⁴ Thus, in 2018 “Continuous Line Map” was brought, and the “Four Sha” doctrine was made more “tangible”.⁵⁵ In the following process, China has introduced to begin some activities in April 2020. China unilaterally named 80 geographical characteristics which include 55 submerged ones, in the South China Sea to put a legitimate basis for its sovereignty and sovereignty rights from historical background. According to this, the area emphasized historic waters and was also a part of China's 200 nautical miles EEZ by the Chinese administration.⁵⁶ The City of Sansha which is located in China’s Hainan Province, has set up two new districts to “administer waters in the Sea” which include Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha islands. Xisha ones correspond in English to the Paracel Islands, Zhongsha ones - definitely more controversially - cover entirely and permanently submerged Macclesfield Bank and “5-7” coral ridges that are seen only above high-tide features in Scarborough Reef.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Julian Ku and Chris Mirasola, “The South China Sea and China's "Four Sha" Claim: New Legal Theory, Same Bad Argument” (25.09.2017). Lawfare, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/south-china-sea-and-chinas-four-sha-claim-new-legal-theory-same-bad-argument> (06.11.2022).

⁵⁵ Richard Javad Heydarian, “China’s ‘new’ map aims to extend South China Claims” (29.04.2018). AsiaTimes, <https://asiatimes.com/2018/04/for-weekend-chinas-new-map-aims-to-extend-south-china-sea-claims/> (18.04.2022).

⁵⁶ Simon Scarr, Wen Foo, Jin Wu, “South China Sea Ruling”. Reuters Graphics, <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/SOUTHCHINASEA-RULING/010020QR1SG/index.html> (26.08.2023).

⁵⁷ Clive Schofield, “Competing Maritime Claims and Enduring Disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 115-116.



The artificial islands constructed by China in the South China Sea are another subject matter of subject. Aside from the fact that in legal terms its status is the subject matter of another dispute, these strategical acts of China are perceived as a “threat” notably by the USA as well as other coastal states. While the USA is claiming that China will use these “artificial islands” for military purposes, the Chinese government, despite openly rejecting this allegation, claims that the islands will be extensively used for scientific marine research, meteorological observation, and rescue.⁵⁸ Stavridis makes a remarkable comparison in terms of the possible impact of artificial islands in the region on the balance of military power between the parties. As a result of the artificial islands built accordingly, an area of approximately 12 km² (considering that the upper surface area of the US aircraft carriers corresponds to 0.03 km²) in terms of military bases has been created.⁵⁹ It is clear that this situation will give China a logistical superiority in terms of military-material capacity in the region. It shall be noted that these artificial islands are, according to articles 60/8 and 80 of the UNCLOS, such artificial islands and similar installations that do not have the status of an island; they do not have their territorial waters, and their existence and territorial waters shall not be the subject of limitation to exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.⁶⁰

3.2. Economic Dimension of the South China Sea Problem

The estimated amount of crude oil in the South China Sea points to a fairly large reserve ranging from 1.1 billion tons to 17.7 billion cubic meters; As for natural gas reserves, valuations are made ranging from 4 billion cubic meters to 25 to 55 billion cubic meters⁶¹ – and even 190 trillion cubic meters of possible natural gas reserves are given as a possible natural gas reserve, according to 2013 data.⁶² In addition, the South China Sea includes approximately 10% of the

⁵⁸ B. S. Glaser, “The Growing Militarisation of the South China Sea” (29.07.2015). The Interpreter, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/07/29/The-growingmilitarisation-of-the-south-china-sea.aspx/> (05.11.2022).

⁵⁹ Stavridis, p. 263. Today, these artificial islands continue to grow and have approached approximately 13 km²: “China Island Tracker”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/> (28.08.2022).

⁶⁰ Mary George, “Maritime Security and Demilitarisation of the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 73, 77; Tanaka, *ibid.*, 147-148, 163.

⁶¹ Zenel Garcia, *China’s Military Modernization, Japan’s Normalization and the South China Sea Territorial Disputes*. Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2019, 3; Caceres, *ibid.*, Viii.

⁶² Jim Huang and Andrew Billo, *Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Navigating Rough Waters*. New York: Palgrave & Macmillan, 2015, 5-23.



fishing activities, which are very important for the countries of the region⁶³ (1/10 of the total amount of fish caught in the world, which shows how vital it is for the multi-billion dollar fishing industry).⁶⁴

In terms of international trade, it must be highlighted that the South China Sea has a highly strategic location and is a busy navigation route. According to the data of the United States of America Energy Works Department, annually, the majority of more than half of the global commercial fleet's shipping passes through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. Moreover, the South China Sea harbors the routes through which half of the Liquid Natural Gas [LNG] trade and approximately 1/3 of the global crude oil trade passes, and this makes it by far one of the most important trade routes in the world.⁶⁵ In other words, the South China Sea, with the volume and significance of the trade routes it harbors, has become the "Marine Silk Road of the 21st Century"⁶⁶ operating on the sea.

3.3. South China Sea Problem in its Strategical Aspect

Chinese administration's policy in the South China Sea region (islands and waters) since the end of 2012, in particular, carries symbolic and strong messages. Although some of them are indirect; some of them contain direct messages for the neighboring countries and powers of interest. Chinese sovereignty being shown in the passports issued in the regions comprising the South China Sea (including Taiwan) is exemplary of this situation. Apart from these, except for indirect attempts such as enabling the dispatch of the Chinese fishermen to piscary or bunkering in the regions of the South China Sea (through BeiDou Navigation Satellite System), there are also direct de facto attempts whereby China has opened the conflicted islands/ islets in the region to civil and/or military settlement. According to Enrico Fels and Truong-Minh Vu; the underlying reason for these active and even aggressive policies pursued by the Beijing administration while holding its ground in the South China Sea might be the desire of China to convert into a "naval force" from a "land force" as the region is the most important and

⁶³ Garcia, *ibid.*, 4-6; "South China Sea Dispute: UPSC International Relations Notes", Byju's, <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/south-china-sea-dispute/> (05.11.2022).

⁶⁴ Jim Huang and Andrew Billo, *ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ Garcia, *ibid.*, 2; Jim Huang and Andrew Billo, *ibid.*, 5; Tanaka, *ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁶ Giovanni Arrighi et al., "Historical capitalism, East and West" in *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives*, ed. Giovanni Arrighi et al. (London: Routledge & Curzon, 2003), 270; Keyuan Zou, *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*. New York: Routledge, 2021, 1; Raditio, *ibid.*, 161-162.



strategical water area for China.⁶⁷ In addition, the South China Sea problem also has significant importance for the USA which is the rival to the People's Republic of China. There is particularly a difference of opinion between the administrations in Beijing and Washington in terms of the ambiguous basis of the alliance that was established officially after 1979 (unofficially before it) between them,⁶⁸ as well as in terms of the freedom of navigation⁶⁹ which is continuously being highlighted and dwelled on by the USA. Albeit the USA has no sovereignty claims on the islands/islets and the body of water in the South China Sea, the USA frequently highlights freedom of navigation⁷⁰ due to its global importance in terms of the trade ways in the region, thereby leading to the increasing show of flag⁷¹ by the USA marines in the region vis-à-vis the Chinese moves.⁷² In the direction that shows this; the US Fleet has made a growing number⁷³ of Freedom of Navigation Operations "FONOPs" in South China Sea's disputed areas since October 2015. According to Eleanor Freund:

⁶⁷In this increasing trend, Admiral Liu Huaqing, who adapted Mahan's "Sea Sovereignty Theory" to China in the 1980s, for the Beijing Administration, which wanted to establish sovereignty over the resources of the South China Sea and the important trade routes it had been influential: Raditio, *ibid.*, 77-78.

⁶⁸ Enrico Fels and Truong-Minh Vu, *Power Politics in Asia's Contested Waters: Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea*. Switzerland: Springer, 2016, 5.

⁶⁹In today's South China Sea between the USA and China, the USA's defense of "freedom of navigation" in response to China's "sovereignty" objection comes to mind - perhaps ironically as a requirement of the modern conjuncture - while working as a lawyer in the Netherlands-based East India Company in the 17th century. The "father of international law", which led to great changes in international maritime law and international trade, with the introduction of the principle of "freedom of the seas" against the Spanish and Portuguese who claimed sovereignty over the whole sea, under the 12th chapter of his work "*De Jure Praedae Commentarius*" named "*Mare Liberum*". " brings the theses of Hugo Grotius, which is counted: Hedley Bull, Benedict Kingsbury, Adam Roberts, *Hugo Grotius and International Relations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 45, 71, 74, 106, 209-213.

⁷⁰ The USA persists that freedom of navigation of military vessels is a universally accepted practice arising from international law – in other words, states do not have the right to limit navigation or exercise any control for security purposes in EEZs. Australia stands same basis with USA but not all countries accept this interpretation. Brazil, Argentina, Iran, Oman, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives and Vietnam agree with China that warships cannot have automatically right of innocent passage in their territorial seas. Twenty other developing countries (Brazil, India, Malaysia and Vietnam) emphasize that "*military activities such as close-in surveillance and reconnaissance by a country in another country's EEZ infringe on coastal states' security interests and therefore are not protected under freedom of navigation*": Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China is bending the rules in the South China Sea", 17.02.2021, The Interpreter | Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea> (26.08.2023).

⁷¹ Sam LaGrone, "7th Fleet CO: Deployed LCS USS Gabrielle Giffords 'Pretty Much Owned' South China Sea", 27.05.2021, U.S. Naval Institute (USNI), <https://news.usni.org/2021/05/27/7th-fleet-co-deployed-lcs-uss-gabrielle-giffords-pretty-much-owned-south-china-sea/> (03.11.2022).

⁷² Jim Huang and Andrew Billo, *ibid.*, 8.

⁷³ Jeff Smith, "Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation", 16.02.2021, Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south-china-sea-spratlys/#:~:text=Based%20on%20publicly%20available%20information,higher%20than%20those%20publicly%20reported> (19.08.2023).



*“Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) is one of the principal tools by which the United States challenges maritime claims deemed excessive under international law. Although the U.S. Navy has conducted FONOPs all over the world for nearly 40 years, recent operations began garnering unprecedented publicity as a point of friction with China in the contentious South China Sea disputes”.*⁷⁴

Especially in the Paracel Islands, China drew straight baselines around them and claimed sovereign waters surrounding it as within 12 nautical miles of the territorial sea all enclosed area.⁷⁵ US fleets challenged those claims; they have made some “innocent passages” (UNCLOS, Article 18) without permission or notification to the claimants' China, Taiwan, and Vietnam (like the Paracel Islands)⁷⁶ but also some of them did not intend solely to transit passage (Article 38 of UNCLOS) (continuous & expeditious) and they included “zig-zag” maneuvers or some intentional drills. Although some kinds of FONOPs had violated innocent passage in territorial waters, those might have been done intentionally to challenge with *de facto* means China’s illegal territorial sea claims around some parts of the area (Mischief Reef, Paracel Islands, etc.). In China side protests and objects to those operations. They accused US military acts violate seriously their sovereignty & security in the region. They declare and interpret in general those acts make “severely breached international laws” & “ironclad evidence of the US pursuing navigation hegemony and militarizing the South China Sea”.⁷⁷

4. The USA and China “Power Struggle” Stage: The South China Sea

Under this part, the USA and China’s struggle is explained over economic and military means with current data. In addition, the close connection between these two issues is revealed.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Freund, “Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide”, 10.08.2017, Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative [AMTI], <https://amti.csis.org/freedom-of-navigation-practical-guide/> (20.08.2023).

⁷⁵ Straight baselines drawing is pivotal point issue here because when they established legally first, they become the main point from which a state can measure the breadth of its territorial sea, the contiguous zone and other maritime zones (UNCLOS Article 3, 7, 33). China claims to all enclosed area as part of its sovereign waters by drawing straight baselines around Paracel Islands. US rejects those China’s claims over Paracels because it finds illegal (UNCLOS allows only Archipelagic states to draw straight baselines around island groups (Article 47/1)) because of being China’s continental state, not an Archipelagic state.

⁷⁶ Heather Mongilio, “China Protests U.S. South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Operation”, 24.03.2023, U.S. Naval Institute (USNI), <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/24/china-protests-u-s-south-china-sea-freedom-of-navigation-operation> (20.08.2023).

⁷⁷ Heather Mongilio, “China Protests U.S. South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Operation”, 24.03.2023, U.S. Naval Institute (USNI), <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/24/china-protests-u-s-south-china-sea-freedom-of-navigation-operation> (20.08.2023).



4.1. The Rising Power with Increased Economic Capacity: China

China has become a global leader not only due to the “unprecedented” economic success in modern history but also due to the long-standing stupendous economic growth and increased human capital; however, at this point, the shift in the economic center of gravity from East to West has become the source of significant political and economic changes and conflicts.⁷⁸ Indeed, years ago commenting on this matter Hugh White stated that “The competition of China with the American Power in Asia is not a future probability but the pure truth of our present”.⁷⁹ The real prudential concern was that the economic growth, which is steadily increasing, would accelerate its military “armament”, and this would be reflected in the form of a “power struggle” on a global scale. As such, the following is one of the projections made regarding the extent of probable capacity that would be presented by China with the support of its economic power:

“It may be helpful to think of China as a rather large octopus, which uses its ink to blind and confuse its opponents, and whose diplomacy, relations with Iran and North Korea and other nations, unfair trading practices, foreign investments, industrial and military espionage, cyber warfare, and buildup of modern arms and ballistic missiles present a threatening aspect to the world, including the United States.”⁸⁰

In order to understand the dynamics lying under the current military armament of China, we shall first assess the “unprecedented” economic growth it has achieved, and by extension, the increase in incomes and accumulation of capital. As of the end of the 1970s China has attained an annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of approximately 10%;⁸¹ the steadily continuing positive economic growth has led China to surpass the USA in purchasing power parity in total GDP by the end of 2014. This development has, for the first time in a period longer than a century, prevented the USA from maintaining its rank as the “world’s biggest economy”. It is beyond question that this was due to the success of China in consummately integrating itself into the capitalist-global economic system led by the USA. By this means, it has become a country with a significant economic size and weight in the Pacific-Asia region. China, which has 37% of Asia’s population, used to produce 14% of the total GDP in Asia in 2000. When it came to 2012, China with 35% of Asia’s population, had 37% of the

⁷⁸ Enrico Fels and Truong-Minh Vu, *ibid.*, 7; Arrighi, *ibid.*, 203 et al.

⁷⁹ Hugh White, “Power Shift. Australia’s future between Washington and Beijing”, *Quarterly Essay*, 2010, Vol. 39, No. 2, www.quarterlyessay.com/issue/power-shift-australia%E2%80%99s-future-between-washington-and-beijing/ (03.11.2022).

⁸⁰ J. H. Hughes, “China’s Place in Today’s World”. *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 35, No. 2, 2010, p. 167.

⁸¹ Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, *ibid.*, 116.



total GDP in Asia. Between 2000 and 2012, China's share in Asia export markets tripled and reached 36%; and manufacturing sector goods [% 41], as well as its production based on cheap labor force – worker [% 52], played a significant role in this achievement.⁸² The size of the Chinese manufacturing sector totaled \$4 trillion which corresponded to about 30% of the country's total input in 2018. In the same year, China's share in the total production of the global manufacturing sector had reached 28%.⁸³ China, following the 2010s, has become the world's “biggest exporter”, “second biggest importer”, “one of the countries that attract the most foreign capital” and “the country with the largest foreign exchange reserves”.⁸⁴ This was enabled by the fact that China had doubled its economic size every 7 years. This was explained, in short, as the “Chinese Miracle” and indicates an “economic capacity that attained a 25-fold growth in 35 years”.⁸⁵ Naturally, there were expenses on which this accumulated large capital and income should be spent. Even though global investments in China have increased significantly,⁸⁶ the accumulated income and capital were not spent only on the respective expenditures. One of the primary spending items was the military armament and projects in the context of the “regional power” and “power projection” exhibited by China, particularly in the South China Sea.

4.2. Increased Power Projection of China in the South China Sea: China's Military Power

Referring to the statistical data of China on military spending, development, export and import, and GDP proportions, it is plausible to say that the related data is compatible with the steadily growing economy of China, and as far as the proportions are concerned, it may even be said that the volume of the growing economy of China has a more positive effect on its military expenditure and growth compared to the USA and Russia. According to the data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], as of 2018 China [Although Chinese statistics are not based on official data, research containing robust and close indicators have been used] has become the second country [250 billion dollars] with the highest military spending behind the USA [648.8 billion dollars], and Saudi Arabia was in the third rank [67.6

⁸² Enrico Fels and Truong-Minh Vu, *ibid.*, 8.

⁸³ Felix Richter, “These are the top 10 manufacturing countries in the World”, World Economic Forum [WEF], [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/countries-manufacturing-trade-exports-economics/\(04.11.2022\)](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/countries-manufacturing-trade-exports-economics/(04.11.2022)).

⁸⁴ Fatih Oktay, *Çin: Yeni Büyük Güç ve Değişen Dünya Dengeleri*. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2017, 1.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, *ibid.*, 117-119.



whereas Russia was in the sixth rank [61.4] among the list of the countries with the highest military spending.⁸⁷ In 2019 it is noted that both the USA [731 billion dollars] and China [266 billion dollars] increased military spending.⁸⁸

In the meaning of military spending, the major aspect of China differentiating it from other major powers that have increased their military spending within the context of a “power struggle” is that despite China's lagging in terms of technology and quality, and even though its military spending is constantly increasing, its effect on China's budget is not much due to its growing economy. This situation is also reflected in the statistics. Between 2002 and 2019, China's proportion of military expenditure has steadily decreased among public spending. That is, proportionally, the 11.87% rate in 2002 decreased to 5.4% in 2019.⁸⁹ Moreover, according to the data where the global average of the military expenditure to the GDP was 2.2%, Russia is listed at 3.9% and the USA at 3.4%. China, on the other hand, is ranked below the world average with a proportion of 1.9%.⁹⁰ Based on the data relating to military expenditures; even though China is lagging behind the USA and China in terms of military supplies, equipment, and technology, considering that China is the second country with the highest amount of military spending, which has also been steadily increasing, and considering that when compared to China's rivals, this expenditure is not overpressuring its budget, it is plausible to say that in time, it seems highly possible that China would confront the super powers as a critical military power that “should be paid regard to”. Thus, the patrolling of the military forces of the USA and China in the South China Sea, their participation in drills as well and the periodically escalating tensions constitute concrete evidence of the “power struggle” backed by the South China Sea.

China is not abandoning its sovereignty claims on the South China Sea, and is not recognizing the decisions of international law, instead, it is trying to “manipulate” international law according to its interests. While, in addition, it does not refrain from showcasing its power

⁸⁷STATISTA: The Countries with the Biggest Military Budgets, <https://www.statista.com/chart/9100/the-top-15-countries-for-military-expenditure-in-2016/> (05.11.2022).

⁸⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database: Data for All Countries 1949 – 2019, (Excel Spreadsheet), <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/> (06.11.2022).

⁸⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database: Data for All Countries 1949 – 2019, (Excel Spreadsheet), <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/> (06.11.2022).

⁹⁰ STATISTA: Military expenditure as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in highest spending countries 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266892/military-expenditure-as-percentage-of-gdp-in-highest-spending-countries/> (06.11.2022).



and sending messages to other “powers” by continuously increasing its military existence in the South China Sea. In recent years, it has been noted that the Chinese armada has significantly developed both in terms of quantity and quality within this framework. “Aircraft carrier” projects launched primarily at the end of the 1970s epitomize this development. The history of the first aircraft carrier of China can be traced back to “Varyag” the construction of which had begun during the Soviet period. Accordingly; Varyag, the construction of which had begun during the Soviet Union period as the second ship of “Admiral Kuznetsov” class, but which was not completed, having been sold by Russia to Ukraine, was purchased in 1998 from Ukraine by the Russian government as “a hull without engine and wheel (rudder)”. In November 2001 it passed through the Straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles⁹¹ and reached the Dalian Port of China in March 2002. The repair, maintenance, and installation/modification works were completed in 2012. Thus, “Varyag” which was almost reproduced and renewed at the shipyard in Dalian got on stream as the first aircraft carrier of China in its new name Type 001 “*Liaoning*” (CV-16) in its brand new form.⁹²

The Shandong “Type-002” with a capacity of 24 J-15 fighter jets (or It can carry up to a combination of 36-44 fighters, helicopters, and drones) is 315 meters long, 75 meters wide, and weighs 70.000 tonnes. The statements made by China’s state-run broadcasting agency about “the need for at least six more aircraft carriers” vis-à-vis 11 active USA carriers are highly remarkable⁹³ (Nevertheless, information and footage are available regarding the construction of the third “Type-003” aircraft carrier named “*Fujian*” that is known to be smaller than the USA carriers weighing 100.000 tonnes and bigger than “*Charles De Gaulle*” of 42.500 tonnes

⁹¹James R. Holmes, “The Long, Strange Trip of China’s First Aircraft Carrier”, 03.02.2015, Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/03/the-long-strange-trip-of-chinas-first-aircraft-carrier-liaoning/> (02.11.2022); “Varyag artik uçak gemisi”, NTV, 25.09.2012, https://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/dunya/varyag-artik-ucak-gemisi.jdZKOhVzs0605wthLKD7kw/OTtVi6JaLEuFdzXKs_63RA/ (02.11.2022).

⁹²“China’s first aircraft carrier enters service”, BBC News, 25.09.2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19710040> (02.11.2022).

⁹³ “Chinese Navy Type 002 Shandong aircraft carrier continues to strengthen the research of tactics and training methods”, Navy Recognition, 29.10.2020, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2020/october/9206-chinese-navy-type-002-shandong-aircraft-carrier-continues-to-strengthen-the-research-of-tactics-and-training-methods.html> (02.11.2022); Gerry Shih, “China’s third aircraft carrier takes shape, with ambitions to challenge U.S. naval dominance”, The Washington Post, 16.09.2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-third-aircraft-carrier-takes-shape-with-ambitions-to-challenge-us-naval-dominance/2020/09/16/d1068f8c-f674-11ea-85f7-5941188a98cd_story.html (02.11.2022).



so it is being built at 80.000 tonnes interval but also it is bigger than Type-002 Shandong⁹⁴). In addition, with Type-055 “Nanchang” destroyer is referred to as being the “strongest warship of China” during the marine parade on 23 April 2019 on the occasion of the “70th establishment anniversary” of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA) as well as one submarine, and a number of small destroyers and frigates,⁹⁵ the reason underlying the importance attached by Chinese administration to the strengthening of its naval capacity becomes clear with the analysis made towards the use of this capacity as “deterrence” to primarily to its neighboring countries as well as to their allies, namely the USA forces, who are continuously participating in joint drills/patrols, in the South China Sea which is the most significant strategic region for China’s sovereignty claims.

Explaining the reason underlying the huge investments in naval power by China basing it solely on the geographical structure would be an underestimation; apart from this, its new effective and long-range destroyers, frigates and cruisers, and in particular, its Yuan class submarines with Kilo and “Air Independent Propulsion (AIP)” systems, make them “an effective anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) tool that blocks, limits and deters enemy access”.⁹⁶

When it is compared at the figures for 2022-2023: the USA owns 68 submarines (all of them are nuclear; 14 of them are ballistic missile (SSBNs) and 54 of them consist of attack (SSNs) variants), shows that China has become the leader in the total number of submarines ((78) 11 of which are nuclear submarines)⁹⁷ accordingly. At this point, it should be noted that nuclear propulsion/powered and conventional diesel-electric submarines have some advantages and disadvantages. According to this, while nuclear submarines have unlimited range because of no refueling requiring a nuclear reactor during their lifespan, conventional ones have to recharge their batteries so they must often make snorkeling but powered by Li-ion batteries and

⁹⁴ Liu Xuanzun, “China’s 3rd aircraft carrier Fujian ‘makes smooth progress’ in mooring trials ahead of expected maiden voyage”, *Global Times*, 13.03.2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1287212.shtml> (21.04.2023).

⁹⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady, “China’s Navy Showcases New Type 055 Guided Missile Destroyer in Naval Parade: A naval parade to honor the 70th anniversary of the creation of the Chinese Navy included the service’s latest destroyer class.”, *The Diplomat*, 25.04.2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/chinas-navy-showcases-new-type-055-guided-missile-destroyer-in-naval-parade/> (02.11.2022).

⁹⁶ Garcia, *ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

⁹⁷ “Top 10 Countries With Most Submarines (2023)”, *The Maritime Post*, 04.01.2023, [https://themaritimepost.com/2023/01/top-10-countries-with-most-submarines-2023/\(10.01.2023\)](https://themaritimepost.com/2023/01/top-10-countries-with-most-submarines-2023/(10.01.2023)).



equipped AIP propulsion submarines can operate at patrol-quiet state or sit on the seabed for several weeks without surfacing (German Type 212 AIP submarines can stay underwater up to three weeks). Nevertheless, nuclear submarines come with a high cost of nuclear technology so this is a serious burden of defence budgets. In brief, “superior speed, range, stealth, and endurance make the nuclear submarine a very effective offensive weapon, capable of projecting power and taking the fight to the enemy.”⁹⁸ Still, on several accounts, the nuclear advantage is limited and Li-on battery powered & AIP equipped conventional submarines turn into almost silent, stealth and also they fit the best cost/effective solutions for littoral, coastal waters.⁹⁹

According to Michael Walker and Austin Krusz from the U.S. Navy; “*In the littorals, such as the South China Sea, diesel submarines could be a versatile asset. With naval bases in Okinawa, Singapore, Subic Bay, and Guam, range and endurance become less of a concern. For naval combat within the first island chain, fighting with a purely nuclear-powered fleet is a waste of assets. Conventional submarines would be of benefit in littoral waters that offset their limited operating*”.¹⁰⁰

Considering the advantages of conventional submarines in terms of production speed (approximately four submarines per year)¹⁰¹ and capacity (expanding and increasing the capacity of the Bohai shipyard in Huludao),¹⁰² it is clear that China, which is a coastal state, will use both its strategic and numerical advantage of its submarines in the South China Sea. On the other hand, China invests in developing the quantity and quality of its SSBNs & SSNs. Even if US nuclear submarines have no range limitation and also higher capacity qualitatively, the US may have to act together with other coastal states to take countermeasures against China’s bigger and more deterrent existence in the region. Conventional (Li-on Battery powered & AIP propulsion new classes) submarine investments may be another cost/effective

⁹⁸ Michael Walker and Austin Krusz, “There's a Case for Diesels”, U.S. Naval Institute [USNI], June 2018, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018/june/theres-case-diesels#:~:text=The%20nuclear%20reactor%20on%20board,few%20hours%20at%20top%20speed> (10.01.2023).

⁹⁹ Hans Ohff, “Nuclear versus diesel-electric: the case for conventional submarines for the RAN”, “The Strategist” from Australian Strategic Policy Institute [ASPI], 11.07.2017, [https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/nuclear-versus-diesel-electric-case-conventional-submarines-ran/\(15.11.2022\)](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/nuclear-versus-diesel-electric-case-conventional-submarines-ran/(15.11.2022)).

¹⁰⁰ Walker & Krusz, *ibid*.

¹⁰¹ David Axe, “Can China Build 76 Submarines in 10 Years?”, National Interest, 23.10.2020, [https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/can-china-build-76-submarines-10-years-171291\(20.11.2022\)](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/can-china-build-76-submarines-10-years-171291(20.11.2022)).

¹⁰² H. I. Sutton, “Chinese Increasing Nuclear Submarine Shipyard Capacity”, USNI News, U.S. Naval Institute [USNI], 12.10.2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/10/12/chinese-increasing-nuclear-submarine-shipyard-capacity> (20.11.2022).



option for US Naval efficiency if it can be evaluated within US naval bases which are in the region.

Ian Storey of the Yusof Ishak Institute, with its headquarters in Singapore, states that with the completion of the third aircraft carrier, China will have a fleet surpassing the battleships of the Far East and Southeast Asian states, including India and Japan, and that “*This will be another indicator that China has emerged as the biggest naval might in Asia*”. The power projection of China, planning to own “the biggest naval force in Asia” is – without a doubt- not directed towards and limited to only the coastal Asian states in the region. The control and security of international trade routes are imperative for the interests of the USA; on the other hand, through developing cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, Japan and South Korea, forming military alliances and performing joint drills¹⁰³, and to an extent, by assuming the responsibility of their security, it is understood that the aim of this power accumulation by China is not “regional” in a sense and that it is projected against the USA as a “global” competitor vis-à-vis the continuous presence of the USA navy in the region.

However, at this point, it should be borne in mind that the USA-China relations have a peculiar side. The concept of “cool war” raised by Noah Feldman explains this situation in depth. According to the author, on the one hand, we witness a power struggle between two states in its classical/ realpolitics meaning, and on the other hand, we witness a process whereby the relations of economic cooperation and interdependence are deepening through which both states are becoming more “dependent” on each other. That is to say that the USA needs a loan from China, and China needs its primary customer, the USA, for its manufactured goods. Therefore, their growth-indexed destinies are interdependent.¹⁰⁴ The most open indicator of this is as of 2017 the USA’s debt to China reached 1.1 trillion dollars corresponding to 1/3 of its total debt.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Julian Ryan, “Japan and Britain send ‘symbolic message’ to China with joint naval drills near disputed islands”, 26.08.2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3146466/japan-and-britain-send-symbolic-message-china-joint-naval-drills> (15.11.2022); “US, UK aircraft carriers lead show of naval might around South China Sea”, 07.10.2021, Radio Free Asia. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/usa-uk-southchinasea-10072021172517.html>(06.11.2022).

¹⁰⁴ Noah Feldman, *Cool War: The United States, China and the Future of Global Competition*. New York: Random House, 2015, xii.

¹⁰⁵ “US debt to china how much does it own”, The Balance, <https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-debt-to-china-how-much-does-it-own-3306355/>(06.11.2022).



5. Conclusion

As a result of the growth in the material capacity by reason of the accumulation of income and capital stemming from the Chinese economic growth, the first signs heralding that China would be projecting its “hard” power globally rather than “soft” in the years ahead through its actions in the South China Sea which is seen as its “historical sphere of influence”. In these territories, China aims to control the most significant trade routes on a global scale, and the continuous and increasing presence of the US Navy in those territories by way of patrolling, FONOPs, and joint drills is perceived as a threat to its sovereignty claims due to the fact that the USA is an ally to both other coastal states as well as states such as Japan and South Korea. Eventually, facing the USA hegemony that China would engage in competition and struggle to start within its own sphere of influence and subsequently on a global scale was among the expected possible results as predicted by the Realists, and it is evident that the process has already started. However, the realists shall not disregard one particular issue beyond their classical conceptualizations, and that is the increasing economic interdependence between the USA and China throughout this deep and historical process. This is the distinguishing characteristic of the USA-China relations from the USA-USSR Cold War relations. Accordingly, it will be more plausible to expect a “cool” relationship equilibrium would be expected that rather than a “cold” one. Of course, at this point, it may well be expected that the probable “cool” relations with the USA might get “warmer” due to China’s continuous strengthening of its military power capacity, in particular its naval elements, in a manner that marks a purpose beyond matching with the powers of regional states, as well as continuing its sovereignty claims (that it has not managed to base it on a legal substructure) in the South China Sea through its increasingly aggressive policies both by direct military elements and by the construction of artificial islands.

The course of affairs will certainly be determined by the insistence of the USA’s and China’s power projection moves in the South China Sea as well as their pursuit of prospective “manufacturer & client” markets that would obviate their economic interdependence insofar as these moves are concerned. As a matter of fact, when we look at the developments in the region; It is seen that the USA and its Western Allies are looking for new producer markets in order to replace China's manufacturing power to a certain extent, and investments are shifted to alternative places. Those are not only about civil or military industry products but also high



technology issues like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, etc. This requires a serious technological infrastructure and human resources. When viewed from this aspect, India looks like one of the preminent candidates and may even come to mind first for this place.¹⁰⁶ The vital issue here is that the investments should not be concentrated in a single present ally/future potential competitor in a way that will turn into threatening military power in the future. For this reason, the re-distribution of capital, critical systems, and technological investments to more than one country seems to be a more “balanced” way. Thus, if it is not too late, it prevents to accumulation of capital and technological infrastructure in one state which shows hegemonic power projection and it can build a more stable structure in the region for the future. Therefore, the extent to which the USA will compensate for its “historic strategic mistake” will be one of the decisive factors in competition. Another factor would be the deterrence cards of the parties and the establishment of “reminder” control mechanisms about it. It is observed that international law and arbitration decisions are insufficient and dysfunctional to solve the South China Sea dispute between the parties to a certain extent. Diplomacy and policy remain other options to find a solution or temporize for this dispute. However, the confrontation of two powers in the region seems to be inevitable and is suitable under the overlooked Realist views. At this point, even if this is not called an “arms race” by the USA frankly, China emphasizes that this is triggering an “arms race” between the two powers. Furthermore, this process has a “tunnel vision” effect¹⁰⁷ on the two powers and also it pushes them irreversibly because of mutual mistrust. The way out of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ volute, prolonging the process and bringing it under control at a certain “balance” and/or establishing a brake device depends clearly on the parties’ choice of using diplomacy and policy as effective “tools” in addition to their military options.

¹⁰⁶ Nandita Bose, Jeff Mason, Steve Holland, “India's Modi starts Washington visit to build Biden, US ties”, 22.06.2023, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-will-not-lecture-modi-human-rights-white-house-says-2023-06-21/> (23.08.2023).

¹⁰⁷ I borrowed this term which is about scarcity effects like “*tunneling*” or “*tunnel vision*” on behaviour, willpower and psychology from Sendhil Mullainathan & Eldar Shafir’s book of “*Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*”: Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Times Books, 2013, 59 et al. This term can be used metaphorical reference to explain irreversible or intractable behaviours for arms race conditions (struggle for scarce resources in similar conditions specially) in international relations too.



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