

## China's South China Sea Strategy

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The South China Sea (SCS) and its inclusive islands, shoals and reefs is one of the most disputed regions of the world. The region is locked in a territorial dispute between several South East Asian nations along with the People's Republic of China. The region is supposedly rich in hydrocarbons and it has major fishing resources and includes vital trade and energy supply routes for the economically developed countries in the region like China, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. The major point of contestation is regarding China's sovereignty claims over the entire SCS region as exemplified by its Nine Dash Line<sup>1</sup> that would put multiple important trade routes and strategic locales under Chinese control. Regional powers like Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have been opposing China's stance while others such as the Philippines have taken a more contradictory policy towards Chinese claims. Other powers like the United States and Japan vehemently oppose China's sovereignty claims over the region and want to keep the area open for freedom of navigation and trade (Valencia 2018). The situation is a delicate one because

the SCS already has a history of small scale skirmishes over the same islands and waterways and in the present day with increased military capabilities and rising nationalism a minor miscalculation can lead to a major confrontation which could escalate out of control.

Both the US and China are at an impasse with neither country budging on its position. China has embarked on an unprecedented militarization of islands and reefs in the SCS to build up its capabilities and to keep other powers at bay and to defend its claims and interests in the region. The US has taken a more constabulary approach in its SCS policy by carrying out increasing freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in close proximity to islands occupied by China in disputed areas and enforcing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. For China sovereignty over the SCS is non-negotiable and 'indisputable' due to what it sees as historical legal rights to the region. President Xi Jinping has made it clear that China 'will not yield an inch' of its territory during US Secretary of Defense James Mattis' visit to China in June (*Xinhua* 2018). China is

<sup>1</sup>An ambiguous, demarcation line used initially by the Republic of China (1912–49) and subsequently the governments of Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, for their claims on major areas of the SCS. The disputed regions include the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands,

the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank and the Scarborough Shoal. An early map showing a U-shaped eleven-dash line was published in the then Republic of China in 1947.

rapidly expanding the size and capabilities of its navy and air force in this regard. It is placing more emphasis on joint operations among the three services with special attention being paid to amphibious warfare as well as extended air sorties and naval deployments.

## Stormy seas in US-China relations

In the context of this testing period in US-China relations the recent military developments in the SCS region are significant. Though there are multiple countries involved that have stakes and claims, there are two countries that bring the most firepower to the table – the US and China. China's major military build-up in the region has been in its occupied islands and reefs in the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands. The military installations at Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef in the Spratlys and Woody Island in the Paracels are strategically important to China's wider Pacific naval strategy. China had undertaken a massive reclamation and island building campaign in these places to build military outposts complete with airstrips, hangars, docks, barracks, radar and communication systems, and naval and air defence systems etc.

The US has warned China to cease its island building and militarization activities in the SCS to keep the waters clear for international trade and passage barring which there would be 'consequences' (US Department of Defense<sup>2</sup> 2018a). The US disinvited China from the 2018 Rim of the Pacific naval exercise for this very reason in May and even staged a flyby of nuclear capable B-52 bombers over the disputed Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal in June. These US diplomatic and military manoeuvres raised tensions as China accused the US of provocation and used this pretext to justify further enhancement of its defence capabilities in the region.

Within the span of a few years China has developed and fortified four major outposts in the SCS and is either already developing other islands or has plans to do so. Fiery Cross Reef is

strategically located in the middle of the access area to the SCS in the south and has been augmented with HQ-9B medium to long range surface to air missiles (296km range) and YJ-12B anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) (546km range). These act as anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weapon systems designed to defend against incoming enemy aircraft and ships. Fiery Cross Reef also has a 3000m long runway and several hangars and is therefore capable of landing and stationing the nuclear capable H6-K strategic bomber which has a range of 3500km along with J-11 and FC-1 fighter jets to conduct aerial bombings in the SCS (DOD 2018b: 118-120).

Furthermore, the YJ-12 ASCMs can even be outfitted on fighter aircraft like the J-11 to increase their range and further overwhelm short range air defence systems on enemy ships like the US Navy's aircraft carriers. The island also has docks and piers to house warships and submarines and can be compared to what former US Army General Douglas MacArthur referenced to Taiwan as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' off the coast of China. During a crisis Fiery Cross Reef has similar potential in enhancing the People Liberation Army's (PLA) power projection capabilities far from the Chinese mainland.

*The defences on the Spratly Islands are important as this arc of A2/AD systems is designed to protect the Yulin naval base, home to China's SSBN fleet. The waters surrounding Fiery Cross Reef are conducive for submarine operations as they plunge into great depths and make it easier to disguise the movements of China's SSBNs*

In addition to Fiery Cross there are similar defences and infrastructure on Subi and Mischief Reef as well. There are also sophisticated radar and early warning systems as well as electronic warfare assets on these islands as per the testimony of Admiral Philip Davidson, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command (Davidson 2018). The defences at

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as DOD

Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi Reef are also important as this arc of A2/AD systems is designed to protect the Yulin naval base, home to China's ballistic missile nuclear submarine (SSBN) fleet. The waters surrounding Fiery Cross are conducive for submarine operations as they plunge into great depths and make it easier to disguise the movements of China's SSBNs as they slip past into the Indian Ocean or break through US defences along the First Island Chain (Torode 2015).

The Type 094 SSBNs at Yulin are crucial for China's sea-based nuclear deterrence capability as part of its nascent nuclear triad. The *Jin*-class (Type 094) SSBNs are not comparatively quiet and therefore masking their movements in the adjacent waters from the anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities of the US Navy will not be easy hence the need for a secondary logistical base at Fiery Cross Reef which is approximately 1024km south from Yulin. Since China does not have a first strike policy regarding nuclear weapons the survivability of its SSBNs is vital in case its land and air based nuclear delivery systems are neutralized to ensure a second strike capability.

*The only logical strategy that seems plausible is that China is developing capabilities to breakthrough US defences along the First and Second Island Chains to let its submarines get close enough to strike targets in the continental US.*

So far the four active Type 094 SSBNs are all docked at Yulin and have not ventured much into offshore waters so it seems like the PLA Navy (PLAN) has adopted a bastion strategy for its SSBNs (Kristensen 2014). The bastion strategy is good for navies with a smaller fleet that cannot sustain continued deterrence patrols. However, keeping the submarines at port also makes them vulnerable to a decapitating enemy strike but considering the stealth capabilities of the Type 094 SSBNs are sub-par to even the Russian Navy's old *Delta III*-class SSBNs (therefore making them less survivable and easier to track compared to their US Navy *Ohio*-class counterparts) (US Office of Naval Intelligence 2009: 22). So in the short-term

keeping them docked and protected by A2/AD systems and hardened underwater shelters seems like relatively best strategy.

The Type 094 SSBNs are armed with 12 JL-2 nuclear armed submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) with a range of 7400km which puts only Guam, the Northern Marianas and parts of Alaska within target range (as far as US territories are concerned) from their current bastions (O'Rourke 2018: 18). This limited range and their current docked positions do not make strategic sense because China's land and air based nuclear delivery systems are capable of striking across longer distances and are protected. The only logical strategy that seems plausible is that China is developing capabilities to breakthrough US defences along the First and Second Island Chains to let its submarines get close enough to strike targets in the continental US. Again the challenge arises in keeping the noisy Type 094 SSBNs undetectable to enemy ASW assets.

## Islands and missiles

In close proximity to Yulin is Woody Island in the Paracels where defence systems similar to those in the Spratlys have been installed. Woody Island also has a functional runway and in May demonstrated the capability to take off and land the H6-K strategic bomber. There are also several hangers to station other aircraft like the J-11 fighter jet. The H6-K can also use conventional weapons like air to ground cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles to harass enemy targets. However, the defence capabilities of the HQ-9B SAMs deployed here and in the Spratlys are doubtful concerning their effectiveness in countering stealth aircraft like the American B2, F-22, F-35 etc. as well as their low flying cruise missiles like the Tomahawk.

While YJ-12B ASCMs can be overwhelming in large numbers and a few might slip through air defences to strike US aircraft carriers it will not be easy considering that the US Navy's carrier battle groups (CBG) are escorted by guided missile destroyers and frigates using Aegis air defence systems as well as other countermeasures. Also the US Navy has much

more operational experience in fighting an amphibious war (in the Second World War during the Pacific campaign over the same islands) as well as superior technology and capabilities. Also China can never be secure that American forces will not be able to penetrate its A2/AD defence bubble as American military experts and officials have been secretive regarding their combat capabilities in the SCS for operational security should such a need arise. The US would also most likely be bolstered by its regional allies like Japan, Australia and New Zealand along with disgruntled neighbours like Vietnam.

However, China's end goal in the SCS and within the First Island Chain (Taiwan, Philippines and Japan) in shoring up its military capabilities is to make US intervention in any regional dispute costly and thus undermining the US alliance structure in the region. The Trump administration's America First policy in regard to established alliance systems in Europe and Asia and growing bonhomie with authoritarian leaders has made its allies doubt how much they can depend on the US to come to their aid.

While the security arrangements with countries such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea have remained intact other countries involved in the heart of the SCS dispute like Vietnam and the Philippines have had an inconsistent security and diplomatic relationship with the US which China has taken advantage to further its 'offshore waters defence' strategy. Offshore waters defence refers to China protecting its interests in its near seas like the SCS and the East China Sea using hybridized naval warfare capabilities and organization. This strategy would also be hyphenated with its 'open seas protection' strategy to protect its sea lines of communication (SLOC) as shown by its network of ports and bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and SCS (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2015).

For the US to intervene like it did during the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis by sending aircraft carriers into the region would become a very risky proposition due to China's anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) and anti-air

capabilities. In fact, it was the US sailing aircraft carriers during the 1995-1996 crisis near Taiwan and the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 during the Kosovo war by the US that forced the Chinese leadership to realize its inferiority in countering US military capabilities. This led to China investing in and developing ASBMs and A2/AD capabilities as well as a modernized navy to prevent such military provocations by the US in the future. Chinese DF-21 and DF-26 ASBMs are designed to sink aircraft carriers, which are the primary symbol of American power overseas, from a range of 1400km and 3000km respectively.

*China's 'offshore waters defence' strategy using hybridized naval warfare capabilities and organization would be hyphenated with its 'open seas protection' strategy to protect its SLOCs as shown by its network of ports and bases in the IOR and SCS*

If a US aircraft carrier is sunk or damaged using an ASBM (each carrier has around 5000-6000 personnel, dozens of aircraft and is worth billions of dollars) then the crisis will potentially escalate. In fact, what makes Chinese A2/AD unique is that it has ASBMs that are designed to and are capable of striking mobile targets at sea. Hence, PLA ASBM capabilities are something of a game changer in the region as they would nullify the ability of the US Navy's CBGs to intervene by raising the costs and risks involved. These ASBMs have a manoeuvrable re-entry vehicle equipped which can change course in-flight making interception extremely difficult for ballistic missile defence systems (US defence sources, however, do not explicitly confirm nor deny their ability to defend against ASBMs) (O'Rourke 2018: 5-8).

## Conclusion

**F**or China to be able to consolidate its strength completely in the SCS and defend against the US within the First Island Chain it has to protect its SLOCs, deny competitors

access to their SLOCs, keep air and sea approaches to Taiwan clear for crisis intervention and use A2/AD forces against enemy assets in the area. Coming to FONOPS conducted by the US and its partners like Australia, the United Kingdom, France and Japan are merely cosmetic in nature as they do not do anything to change the status quo on the ground. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states on the other hand have taken a more accommodating approach towards China favouring trade and stability over confronting China. Indonesia is a good example as when China's Nine Dash Line overlapped the Natuna Islands belonging to Indonesia the country simply increased its naval capabilities in the area but did not publicly lash out at Beijing. The Philippines had initially opposed China's stance in the region but after President Rodrigo Duterte's ascension to power it adopted a more conciliatory approach. This was also in part due to the on-off military partnership with the US.

With China's stakes growing in Africa, West Asia and the Europe as evidenced by China's rapid infrastructure build up in far off regions the SCS is considered to be China's gateway into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, chokepoints at the Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda do not help when it comes to addressing China's insecurities regarding energy supplies and its export driven economy as these can be blockaded by any disgruntled party. Hence, enhanced Chinese capabilities in the SCS gives China not just more bargaining power but if push came to shove then China could flex its military might as necessitated. The old geopolitical reality of 'might is right' is being adhered to in the SCS where hard power is dominating all other arguments.

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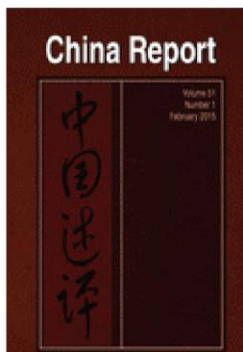


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