



# POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL PRESENCE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The South China Sea and the ongoing dispute about territorial waters and exclusive economic zones over it is an issue that needs an inspection from both international relations and economic perspectives, making it a topic fit for commercial diplomacy. This paper aims to assess the investments to the region of China and its main competitor in the region, the USA. These investments can be military, economic, diplomatic, social, and other ways ranging from soft to hard power and to assess from cultural and historical perspectives to find out potential allegiances of the regional actors in this dispute. To determine these allegiances, we need to review first the reality of the situation; historical background, geographical basic information and similar information based on the facts of the region and conflict and some theories of international relations to understand how these facts interact with each other to form the dispute and maybe towards a future where all these conditions play out to a solution.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, China, Territorial Disputes

## ÇİN HALK CUMHURİYETİ'NİN GÜNEY ÇİN DENİZİNDEKİ SİYASİ VE TİCARİ VARLIĞI ÖZET

Güney Çin Denizi ve bu bölgede yer alan ülkeler arasında süren karasuları ve münhasır ekonomik bölgeler üzerindeki anlaşmazlık hem uluslararası ilişkiler hem de ekonomi açısından incelenebilecek bir konu olduğu için, ticari diplomasi alanında tartışılması uygun olacaktır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Çin'in ve bölgedeki esas rakibi ABD'nin bölgeye olan yatırımlarını değerlendirmektir. Askeri, ekonomik, diplomatik, sosyal ve türlü başka yollardan süren bu yatırımlar, yumuşak güçten sert güce bütün alanları kapsamaktadır. Bu yatırımlara bölgenin kültürel ve tarihsel perspektiflerden bakmak, bölgesel aktörlerin bu anlaşmazlık sürecinde içlerinde bulunacağı tutum ve bağlılıklarının görülmesine destek olacaktır. Bu bağlılıkları belirlemek için öncelikle durumun gerçeklerini gözden geçirmemiz gerekir. Tarihi arka plan, coğrafi temel bilgiler ve bölgede yaşanan çatışmaya dayanan bilgiler ile uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinin beraber ele alınması, bu anlaşmazlığın oluşması ve gelişmesine, hatta olası gelecek çözümlerine ışık tutmak için gereklidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Güney Çin Denizi, Çin, Bölgesel anlaşmazlıklar

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Importance of the South China Sea region stems from its resource rich nature and its hub status of a large portion of global trade but also from the historical conflicts in the region, global power balances, ethnic and economic tensions, and many other regional causes for conflict. Such an important region requires topmost stability to continue trade and resource harvesting, yet it is beset with conflict; minor skirmishes being a daily issue, major confrontations only prevented for the sake of the status quo, and potential wars looming. These two characteristics, requirement for stability and being a hotbed of conflict, makes this dispute and the region a critical problem for commercial diplomacy.

For these reasons studying the South China Sea and its dispute can be beneficial to understand the conflict from its past to current state and may shed some light to the future and be helpful for other research about the region and also on other regions that have similar inherent historic conflicts re-emerging due to discovery of new resources or trade routes, like the East Mediterranean or the Aegean Seas.

The South China Sea and the political and commercial presence of the People's Republic of China over that region is a subject that will be understood with three main questions; thus, these three main questions will form the basis of this work. The first question would be to answer if the political and commercial presence, direct and indirect aids, loans, international projects benefiting the region, etc., by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the South China Sea benefits the Chinese cause in the ongoing dispute about territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. The second question should be about the effects of the historical and cultural relations to PRC and their relation to the ongoing dispute about territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. The last part would be the analyse the current situation and its future with answers to previous questions as our data. And to compare the efficiency of these efforts, US and other western efforts would be used as a benchmark against the findings.

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is a part of the Western Pacific Ocean around 3 million square kilometres, surrounded by South China shores in the north, Indochina in the northeast and the island of Sumatra in the southeast, Borneo in the south and Philippines and Taiwan in the east. Besides five large islands and a mainland in the south, this region has many small islands and many of the islands share them with multiple states, further complicating the issue. (Nguyen, 2005, pp. 6-7)



**Figure 1:** Map of The South China Sea from Philippines Submission in The South China Sea Arbitration  
**Source:** (REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, 2014)



Three groups of islands in this region hold extra meaning to the dispute therefore the literature on this subject. Spratly islands, in the southern part of the sea, formed by some islands and mostly smaller islets, reefs and atolls spread over an area of 400.000 km<sup>2</sup> despite having less than 2 km<sup>2</sup> of land (CIA, 2020). These islands are under occupation by five different countries in the region and were subject to international arbitration (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

Paracel islands are north of the Spratly islands and spread over a smaller area but have nearly quadruple the landmass compared to it (CIA, 2020). The set of islands is claimed both by Vietnam and China (Kaplan, 2014). Despite de jure claims of other parties, it is under the de facto control of China which set Sansha City as its administrative centre (Haver, 2020). And landmass of the island set is increasing both to Vietnamese and Chinese efforts of land reclamation (The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

Hainan island, which is just north of the People's Republic of China and considered by China the administrative capital of the islands in the South China Sea angering regional powers with this extra step of de jure claim (Santos, 2020).

There are many different countries in the South China Sea and thus many different disputes on maritime claims. We can list the main actors with a conflicting region as the People's Republic of China, known mostly as China, the Republic of China, known mostly as Taiwan, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam (Ma X. , 2016). Besides the claimants there are many external countries involved in the dispute either from the region or outside of it; Australia, Japan, India, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Laos, Singapore, Thailand, US can be listed as some of these.

The South China Sea has two distinct importance, resources such as natural gas, oil, and fishery: and trade routes passing through it. Hydrocarbon resources in the region are large and also include the undiscovered potential to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (South China Sea Analysis Brief, 2019) estimates. The region also held half of the world's fishing fleet that caught more than 10% of fish globally in 2015 (Pauly & Liang, 2019). For the second aspect, international trade the sea lanes passing through an area corresponding to one-third of world trade (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016).

### **3. RELATED THEORIES**

#### **3.1. Balance Of Power Theory**

The balance of power theory points out that the survival of a state can be achieved by keeping the military balance of power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, p. 42). By blocking a state to achieve unrivalled military power enabling them to dominate others, this attitude can foster alliances for defensive purposes (Blanton & Kegley, 2017, p. 25).

The balance of power theory can be useful to analyse Chinese and US strategies in the South China Sea. During Cold War, the balance of power stayed on the bipolar Soviet-US system and especially with the Containment strategy of the US and most of the communist countries occupying the northern part of the region were blocked from accessing the ocean in their south, in any way possible by the US. (Duiker, 1994) At the start of this period, we can see China as fairly ineffective towards its surroundings due to inner turmoil in China, after its invasion and turbulent socialist revolution. And this was used as a possibility for the US to install in the South China Sea region. Many countries around China were invaded by the US at the end of World War 2 and received their independence after the acceptance of US hegemony and military bases.

To this point, it can be claimed that a balance of power theory holds true for the smaller nations of the region. As we see countries in the dispute do not push their claims (Yosephine, 2016) or do not have claims but back the powerful states like China or US. This causes a balance of power status in the region that may hold peace as the theory states by forming groups to balance each other.

Yet the balance of power theory has another aspect, a shift of power. Balance of power holds its peace as long as all parties expect others to defend their status to the extreme, to war. To determine if the



military balance of power is useful, parties depending on it for their survival need to determine whether their owner will use it when needed (Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2013, p. 79). In this example, smaller states of the South China Sea need to know the side they are backing will protect them if the need arises. And since this can only be assured when the actual crisis emerges and only be alleged and hoped for before the crisis, it is needed to analyse past examples of crises under this theoretical scope.

### **3.2. Geopolitical Theory**

Theory indicates that geographical conditions dictate the foreign policy of countries, but it can also be seen that other factors affect this inevitability too. China, despite its unchanging geographical status concerning the South China Sea, had to be passive about it and bide its time due to inner turmoil after decades of decline from the opium wars of the mid-19th century to the start of the 20th century when the Republic of China is declared, and civil war starts between nationalists and communists; with World War II and the Japanese invasion of China and after the war socialist revolution and years of adaptation under Mao Zedong's rule. After the first declaration of the nine-dash line, the historical claim of China in the region, China did not actively respond to other countries' claims until the 1970s (Gao & Jia, 2013).

### **3.3. Regional Cooperation and Conflict**

Regional cooperation will consist of interactions between regional states to improve any aspect of political, economic, or military in an institutionalized way. It builds the base for future cooperation and integration. While regional conflict may consist of differences in position by different regional actors (Swanström, 2002, pp. 12,17).

An institutionalized way of regional cooperation leads to regional organizations and one such organization is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which includes every state with a claim on the dispute except China and Taiwan (ASEAN, 2020). Despite not including other members in itself, it led to East Asia Summit, which includes China, Australia, Russia, Japan, India and USA (ASEAN, 2020).

With Chinese avoidance of the issue in ASEAN or East Asia Summits and lack of will in ASEAN countries to oppose China create a lack of regional conflict management by ASEAN and seeking to balance the cooperation by adding counterweight to China like India and USA (Hong, 2013). Regional cooperation and conflict can be used to inspect South China Sea dispute and ASEAN and other regional organizations' perspectives.

### **3.4. Hegemonic Stability Theory**

Hegemonic stability theory proposes that a single power, namely a hegemon, controls the international system to promote stability globally. A hegemon can control using economic, military, or political power and define rules as it wills (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006).

Global hegemonic stability is provided by the USA after World War II, using the economic system created at the end of the war, Bretton Woods (Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2013, p. 118). This economic engine relies on freedom of trade and with Chinese surpassing the USA in trade and many other areas (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020) using the economic engine built by the USA, might produce China as another hegemon, or cause a conflict (Fishman, 2005, p. 303).

South China Sea dispute can be analysed through hegemonic stability theory to see their aims for the year 2025, and to see a clash of Chinese and American hegemonic intentions. This theory will also be useful if the hegemonic stability of the US lasts when challenged.

## **4. ACTORS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THEIR STATUS**

Starting from the north of the sea and going clockwise we can list these countries as the bordering states, People's Republic of China, Taiwan (Republic of China), Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Beyond these, there are other countries with a stake and an active position in the region, Australia, India, Japan, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and the United States of America.



#### 4.1. People's Republic of China

The main actor and the namesake of the region are China, or with its official name, the People's Republic of China (PRC). This country is the most populous one in the world with more than 1.4 billion citizens (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021), and second in nominal GDP with nearly 17 trillion USD.

The People's Republic of China has sustained its economic growth for years and its stable increase compared to global fluctuations put it at the top of the global GDP list (International Monetary Fund, 2021) surpassing the USA which held the position for decades.

Chinese economic history relies on trade and manufacturing, and these are still its strong points. From its earlier starts to today China used its manufacturing power and trade to bolster its stability.

The People's Republic of China is the largest exporter economy in the world (Ma Y. , 2021) and its main exporting markets are located far from its geographic position, either in the west across vast Central Asia filled with deserts and mountains to Europe or in the east across the Pacific Ocean to Americas (Workman, 2020). Both roads have their hardships and problems but due to the subject of this work, the western road to Europe will be the focus and it is also the focus of China with the Belt and Road Initiative.

The economic effects of the ongoing trade war between the USA and China can be seen in the Chinese economy. Mixed with the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, the Chinese economy took a hit yet recovered from it and emerged once more as the largest economy in 2021 (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

The People's Republic of China claims most of the South China Sea as its own using the nine-dash line thesis basing it on its historical roots. Thus, any dispute in the region involves it, making it the main cause of the dispute in the South China Sea.

#### 4.2. Republic of China (Taiwan)

The Republic of China, also known as Taiwan, is an island country situated southeast of the South China Sea. Consisting mainly of the island of Formosa and Penghu islands, it has a population of 23,5 million (2021) with 36 thousand km<sup>2</sup> of land area (Taiwan Snapshot, 2021) under its de facto control.

The economic power of the country, based mainly on electronics exports, especially microchips (Auerback, 2020), supports a nominal GDP of 759 billion USD (International Monetary Fund, 2021)

The history of the Republic of China is shared with the People's Republic of China as both are born out of the same entity. Chinese civil war between the Communist Party of China and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) slowed down during the Japanese invasion of World War II. After the Japanese defeat in 1945 (Instrument of Surrender, 1945), the civil war was reheated. During the following four years of conflict, Kuomintang changed its location and lastly retreated to the island of Formosa now known as Taiwan in 1949.

Both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China contest the title "China" and its privileges trying to establish their legitimacy over their historical backgrounds which makes their claims controversial.

Political status in Taiwan revolves around the divide between unification and independence from China, with the latter becoming the more popular idea in the last two elections (Kuo, 2020).

With the divide between the two countries and the insistence of both on the matter, it is unlikely that a simple and peaceful solution is available. Taiwan pushing for independence escalates the response of China from peaceful (Chung, 2016) to militaristic (Zhen, 2021).

Even though the thawing of US-China relations in the 1970s saw the military presence of the US in Taiwan getting smaller and ending with the shutdown of "United States Taiwan Defense Command" in 1979, US naval presence in the area continued to exist.

With its historical background and current status, Taiwan can be seen as an apparent ally of the USA and an opponent of China in the international arena. Relating to South China Sea disputes, Taiwan,



being in the north of the sea and far from the most disputed islands, is having its issues more with its southern neighbour, The Philippines and occasionally with China mainly over their past conflicts.

Taiwan uses the same basis as PRC to back its claims, historical usage delimited with the nine-dash line, thus including Paracel and Spratly Islands in its claims and drawing a large exclusive economic zone extending into the South China Sea (Tsai, 2016) even though they don't pursue this claim with the fervour of China.

Taiwan, despite its large claim, lacks the military capabilities to project power on most of the South China Sea and its unrecognized status erodes its diplomatic standing on its claims to the region.

### **4.3. The Philippines**

The Philippines is a nation of archipelago marking the eastern border of the South China Sea, consisting of more than 7.500 islands, and covering around 300 thousand km<sup>2</sup> of an area with a population of around 110 million (CIA, 2021). The chain of islands that form the country is home to multiple ethnicities making it a multinational state with its capital in Manila.

Its economy is weaker compared to its northern neighbours, with 402 billion USD as nominal GDP and 3,6 thousand USD of nominal GDP per capita placing it at 118<sup>th</sup> in that aspect.

After the end of World War 2, the Philippines gained its independence from the USA in 1946 (President of the United States of America, 1946). With this transition, the Philippines went from 1946 to 1972 with its elected presidents and in 1972 the then President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law (Official Gazette, 1972). The country saw many coups attempts, rebellions and revolutions since then.

The Philippines is a country located in the Chinese sphere of power (Palanca, 2017), which is more actively used by the Chinese as an investment venue after the deterioration of USA-China trade relations. Yet due to its formation (U.S. Department of State, 2020) and history, the country is more aligned with the USA and protected by it. And it is an important partner of ASEAN, an organization by countries of the region to promote intergovernmental cooperation (ASEAN, 2020).

The Philippines, bordering west of the South China Sea, has a large potential to claim in the region. The country claims clash with the historic nine-dash line of China, North of Borneo, South China Sea islands like Paracel and Spratly and shoals like Scarborough shoal, Islands north of Sabah, and the Luzon Strait located between Taiwan and Philippines (REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, 2014). Contrary to most other countries in the region, the Philippines used the international court system to sue China to enforce its claims and got a ruling against China (REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, 2014).

Even though the Philippines claims clashes with other countries like Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam these points of clashes are minor compared to Chinese and Taiwanese ones and further away from the Philippines, thus no major incident arose in these areas, yet the claims continue as it is.

### **4.4. Malaysia**

Malaysia is a country bordering the south of the South China Sea divided into two main parts; the western one located in the southern half of the Malay Peninsula and the eastern one located northern part of Borneo Island. Bordering Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei over land and the Philippines and Vietnam overseas, Malaysia has a landmass of 330.803km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 32,7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021)

During World War 2, British Malaya and British Borneo fell under Japanese invasion as the British had no fleet and military might nor the economic power to protect the region (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, pp. 247-253). After the surrender of Japan, Britain reconquered the region and started a process of reestablishment, forming the Federation of Malaya and after that Malaysia. Malaysian political system is based on the English system, with an elective monarchy that chooses the head of state from nine state sultans and a parliament.

Being in the British domain prevented Malaysia to enter either the US or Chinese sphere of influence that is clashing in the region. Thus, it aims to be neutral on the large scale and independent power on the regional scale. Trying to counter the US influence in the region, Malaysia tried to form an alternative



to APEC excluding the USA which resulted in Asean+3, regional cooperation excluding the USA and Australia (Stubbs, 2002) while adding China to it (ASEAN Plus Three, 2021).

With the mixed border situation of the country and the federated style of formation, it has disputes with its regional neighbours. Land border disputes with Brunei, Indonesia and Thailand were resolved during the formation of the country but the split of Singapore in 1995 created some disputes which were solved by the International Court of Justice (International Court Of Justice, 2008).

Malaysia also has claims over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea along with other regional powers. Even though Malaysia was not actively pushing its claims in the region to protect the balance of power (Yusof, 2003), recent Chinese attempts made their response firmer (KWEK & HOO, 2020).

#### **4.5. Brunei**

Brunei Darussalam is a country located north of Borneo Island, with its northern side facing the South China Sea while the rest of its borders are with Malaysia. Brunei is a Commonwealth nation and member of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The country has a population of 430.000 (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, 2021) and a landmass of 5.765km<sup>2</sup> (The World Factbook, 2021). Economically Brunei has a GDP (PPP) of 30 billion USD and a GDP (PPP) per capita of 65 thousand USD, putting it in 16<sup>th</sup> place, just after the USA (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

Current day Brunei is a small part of the old Bruneian Empire which spun over Borneo Island to the Philippines. Being a British protectorate until recently, Brunei was influenced heavily by Britain. But with religion as a common point, Brunei has close relations with the Muslim world, especially in the region which is reinforced by its membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 2021).

China being the largest investor in the country and holding multiple parts of infrastructure as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, has a large economical influence on the country (Bowie, 2018).

The USA doesn't have a large influence nor presence in the country, it is a trading partner with 5% of total imports (The World Factbook, 2021).

Brunei's exclusive economic zone claims are overlapping with the Chinese Nine-dash line in the South China Sea. Its historic claims on islands that are under the rule of the Philippines exist but are not pressed or raised as an issue.

#### **4.6. Indonesia**

The Republic of Indonesia is an archipelago nation with over 17 thousand islands spread between the south of Asia and the north of Oceania. With its large spread over the region due to its numerous islands, Indonesia has maritime and land borders with multiple countries, starting with Malaysia in the west to Papua New Guinea in the east.

Indonesia has a 270 million population (Statistics Indonesia, 2021) living over 1,9 million km<sup>2</sup> (United Nations, 2021) making the nation the fourth most populous nation in the world. and half of this population lives on the island of Java (Voice of Indonesia, 2021).

Indonesia has a GDP (PPP) of over 3,5 trillion USD and 13 thousand USD GDP (PPP) per capita making it the 7<sup>th</sup> largest economy (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Indonesian economy had steady growth with only two points of a downturn, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 recession (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

With the start of World War 2, the Netherlands lost its European lands to Germany and the Dutch East Indies got transferred to Japan as part of the Axis alliance in 1940.

Japan, removing the existing establishments ended colonial rule effectively and after the war and independence declaration by nationalists, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta followed suit; starting a war of independence which will last around 4 years, from 1945 to 1949. The war turned into a stalemate and ended with international pressure on the Netherlands, especially the USA threatening to cut its Marshall aid to the Netherlands (Brown, 2003, p. 169).



With the end of the independence war, the United States of Indonesia was formed as a federal state in 1949 and quickly turned into the Republic of Indonesia in 1950 as a unitary state.

The Republic of Indonesia, as an archipelago nation, holds multiple ethnic groups under central control, which shows through its motto: “Unity in Diversity” (Bazzi, Gaduh, Rothenberg, & Wong, 2017). Indonesia is also the 4<sup>th</sup> largest country in the case of population and 1<sup>st</sup> largest in the case of Muslim population (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2021).

Being a member of ASEAN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Indonesia maintains active relations with many countries and intergovernmental organizations. Main export and import partners, starting with China followed by ASEAN members, and the USA, Indonesia holds large trading power in its region (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2021).

The United States of America intervened for Indonesian independence against Netherlands two times, first using the Marshall plan as a tool to secure its independence and the second time for the transfer of West New Guinea to Indonesia. It also looked past the invasion of East Timor to keep Indonesia as a needed ally in the region after the Vietnam War (Burr & Evans, 2001). The historical background reflects positively on the relationship between the two countries.

China had a break in relations with Indonesia during the Suharto period, which blamed the country for the 1965 coup attempt, and this break lasted until 1990. The current view of Indonesia towards China became less favourable over the years according to research, 36% in 2019 compared to 53% in 2018 and 70% in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Indonesia and China have a large trade volume, China being the first exporter and importer for Indonesia, and also have investment ties with the Belt and Road project, recently the Jakarta Bandung railway contract.

Indonesia tried to stay as an intermediary through the South China Sea disputes between neighbouring countries and limit its claims accordingly to not create a conflict nor bias in its mediator status (Connelly, 2016). The exclusive economic zone extending from the Indonesian islands of Natuna overlaps with the Nine-Dash Line of China, making any activity in the region by either side a cause for conflict (Sukadis, 2021).

#### **4.7. Vietnam**

Vietnam, or with its official name Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is located in Southeast Asia, facing the South China Sea in the east and Cambodia and Laos in the west. It shares a land border with China on its north and a maritime border with China on its east. The country also shares maritime borders with Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan through the South China Sea.

Vietnam, with an area of around 310 thousand square kilometres, has a population of 98,5 million which makes it the 15<sup>th</sup> most populous country (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2022). The Vietnamese economy has a GDP (PPP) of around 1,2 trillion USD and 12 thousand USD GDP (PPP) per capita putting it in 23<sup>rd</sup> place on the GDP (PPP) listing while its large population pulls it to 109<sup>th</sup> place in GDP (PPP) per capita listing.

With the French colonisation of Vietnam in the 19th century, “Union Indochinoise”, was formed by Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin, the last three located in current-day Vietnam (Journal officiel de la République française, 1887).

After World War 2 and the surrender of Japan in 1945, control of Vietnam was transferred to allied forces. The region, according to the Potsdam declaration, was to be divided as south and north from the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel, the northern part to be under Chinese control and its surrender to be received by Chiang Kai-shek; while the southern part was to be under French control, surrendered to Supreme Allied Commander (Dommen, 2001, p. 106).

From 1947 to 1954 the region was under conflict during, First Indochina War, south French Indochina claimed full sovereignty over the region including Laos and Cambodia while the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam claimed its sovereignty over the whole of Vietnam. The First Indochina War ended in 1954 with French defeat and the signature of the 1954 Geneva Conference. The agreement officially





divided Vietnam into south and north on the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel (Asselin, 2013). After the agreement, the USA replaced France as the backer of the Republic of Vietnam in the south while China stayed as the backer of the northern party. After a short interlude, Vietnam War also known as the Second Indochina War has begun, in 1955 and lasted nearly 20 years and ended in 1975 with the defeat of the USA. Replacing France in Indochina, the USA supported South Vietnam in the conflict. The exit of the USA, starting from 1973 to 1975 took more than two years and ended with the capture of Saigon and surrender of South Vietnam in 1975, effectively ending Second Indochina War. South and North reunified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.

The government, after some revisions throughout this period, remains a single-party socialist republic, governed from Hanoi, but reformed the processes of governing, lastly with the 2013 constitution. With its economic reforms in 1991, the country became one of the fastest-growing countries in the region (Hansen, Bekkevold, & Nordhaug, 2020).

The country is a member of the ASEAN, WTO and multiple other international organizations and has good relations with its neighbours, the USA, and the EU. With its tumultuous past, Vietnam had the chance to form deep contacts with China, France, and the USA.

Throughout its history, from its formation, Vietnam had its share of conflicts and partnerships with China. Grown as its tributary state, Vietnam internalized Chinese influence both as a threat and as cooperation. Dominating the region for centuries until the French arrival, Chinese aid to Laos and Cambodia through Vietnam's war with them and more recently Chinese claims on the South China Sea near Paracel and Spratly islands and the clashes caused by this (Romanacce, 2021); sums up the perception of Chinese threat by Vietnam.

Vietnam has de facto control over most Spratly and Paracel Islands, disputed by most in the region. China founds its South China Sea claims and Nine-Dash Line demarcation based on historical use and control of the area. Yet Vietnam also poses their claims by historical control of the area, using both Vietnamese and Chinese sources of the era; stating it was under Vietnamese control until the Chinese invasion (Dzurek, 1996).

Vietnam, like China, did land reclamation projects for its islands, enlarging them and making it easier for them to be sustainable while making it harder for foreign powers to control them (Yan, 2021).

#### **4.8. The United States of America**

As the United States of America is not located in the South China Sea region the information regarding it will be limited to its relation to the region for the purposes of this work. The United States of America, due to its economic and military size and its foreign policy is closely related to the South China Sea.

The USA ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in GDP (PPP), surpassed by China in 2017 after decades of long-standing in 1<sup>st</sup> rank (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Its military spending is the largest with 768 billion USD and 3.7% of its GDP; while China follows as 2<sup>nd</sup> with 1,45 trillion Yuan as 1.7% of its GDP. While the US defence budget grows by 2% Chinese budget grows by 7,1% as of 2022 (Cheng, 2022).

Since all the previously listed countries in the South China Sea and their histories are summed up under their respective titles, it is clear that the USA has a rigorous and intertwined past with the region. The United States of America had intervened in most of these countries either in their colonial past or during their transition from their colonial past.

The United States, acts as a protector for Taiwan against potential threats, giving the country military aid directly and positioning its fleet in its periphery. By doing this, the USA is risking a direct conflict with China in front of the Taiwanese strait.

The United States of America held the Philippines as a colony acquired from Spain and after the Pacific reconquest at the end of World War 2, it arranged its independence. With military bases in the Philippines, the USA held a striking distance during the Vietnam War. While the US bases were closed in the 1990s, US-controlled bases in the Philippines continue to exist. These bases and military deals with the Philippines provide the USA with an outpost to intervene in the South China Sea (Lamothe, 2016)



Malaysia has the least history with the USA mostly due to its being a British colony for a long period and its return to British control after World War 2 contrary to many other countries in the region getting under the US control. Yet they have had multiple trade agreements and military operations and exercises in the last decades, especially starting with the Pivot to East Asia initiative (Goldberg, 2016).

Indonesia, despite being a Dutch colony for most of its colonial history had seen US intervention twice during its independence struggle, putting the USA in good favour with the country. US military needed Indonesia as an ally during the Vietnam War and this was reflected in their aid to the country, and it looked past most of its internal turmoil and governance issues to protect their alliance.

The greatest conflict in the region for the past century would be the Indochina Wars, especially the Vietnam War between the USA and North Vietnam of the day. That conflict, forever scarring both the US populace and with it the place of the US in the global culture, forced a militarily active and involved the US in the region. The US came to the region with containment ideas, originally against the USSR but afterwards against China and ideologically communism or socialism in any form that would link to these countries (Ngoei, 2019). Despite the harsh reality of the Vietnam War, Vietnam and the USA has tame relations and the USA-Vietnamese alliance against China can be put forward (Tran, 2020).

The US put extra emphasis on the region between 2009 and 2017 under President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" or "East Asia Strategy." With diplomatic, economic, and military influence and effort spent on the region, the USA aimed to counter the growing Chinese sphere of influence and shift the balance of power once more towards itself, focusing especially on Taiwan (Chow, 2014).

Continuing the trend set by Obama's presidency, Donald Trump used China as a focal point of his election campaign and also as a special issue to be dealt with at the presidential level. The China-United States trade war started during this period, harming both countries, but more than its economic harm it challenged the Hegemonic theory, breaking the stability and free-market ideas (Sheng & Nascimento, 2021). The trade war, despite losing its fervour under Biden's presidency, still goes on since the tariffs imposed aren't removed yet.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In the South China Sea region, we can see a conflict of interest between all parties and as this conflict threatens the largest volume of sea trade in the world the issue can't stay local as it is prone to flare up into a much larger clash. Our current theories of balance of power, geopolitics, regional cooperation and conflict, and hegemonic stability; all play into this conflict.

After listing all the actors involved in the region it is apparent that the main clash is between China (People's Republic of China) and the rest of the region, mostly backed by the United States of America. All the historical and cultural backgrounds of the regional actors, point toward a common past with China mostly as a tributary or with the current terminology as a Chinese sphere of influence and dominance. With the historical background, we can see this trend declined after the opium wars as China declined and become unable to project power in the region. This shift of power opened the region to foreign influence, British, French, Spanish, Dutch and lastly American. During this era, these foreign powers carved up their dominions and spheres of influence from the Chinese and fought each other for more control. The power slowly consolidated into fewer divisions and finally, after World War 2, most of these powers couldn't control a faraway colony with their war-weary and spent conditions. Thus, the region fell under the hegemony of the USA and the new institutions and rules set by the USA in the post-war era concerted with its hegemony.

Yet the same era also saw the rise of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, creating a world with two political poles, divided ideologically, economically, geographically and in many other ways. During the Cold War era, the USA tried to contain Chinese expansion in the South China Sea region like many other regions, while China, recovering from its crippling long civil war tried to recuperate its relations with as much of the region as it can. This Chinese expansion blocked by the USA intervention led to many conflicts, proxy wars and crises; the most prominent being the Vietnam War.



The geopolitical theory proposes that geography affects political status, and we can see that with the chokehold that the South China Sea forms over the world trade and with the importance of islands and other features in the region.

Regional cooperation and conflict theory will provide us with the ASEAN and its ASEAN way to approach conflicts, promoting consensus, compromise, and consultation; and informally doing these, quietly and away from the public's view, without escalating the situation (Masilamani & Peterson, 2014). This approach may be seen as ineffective in solving the dispute it is most helpful to harbour cooperation within the region without this dispute blocking communication.

The balance of power theory applied to the region can be seen where many of the regional actors not acting or reacting to Chinese advances with their own devices. Since many of the actors, despite their claims wouldn't prefer an existential threat like Chinese military action towards them to protect and act on their claims actively. Yet to protect the status quo and the ongoing relative peace many of the actors use international organizations and mechanisms to help them, most of them held by the USA. To react to Chinese advances instead of a single regional actor, the USA and said actors group together to maintain the balance of power.

Hegemonic stability theory states that a single hegemon holds power over the international system and promotes global stability by defining economic, military, and political rules. After World War 2, the USA provides the economic system and military protection of the said system. Yet, China using this economic system to its benefit surpassed the USA, emerging as a potential hegemon.

With these theories, we can explain the current situation in the South China Sea but not its solution or future. Both balances of power and hegemonic stability theories show us a transition in the region and the globe in general. The shift of power will occur if the balance of power is threatened by one side, in this case, China and not protected from its extreme, war, by the opposing side. And the hegemon will stop being the lynchpin of global stability if it loses either economic or military dominance.

China, as opposed to the USA, doesn't push an international economic and political model and institutions to back it up like IMF, World Bank, UN, or the NATO; and in this regard, it can't be seen as a true candidate for global hegemon. It plays by the rules set by the hegemon but uses them to its benefit and tries to stop the hegemon from changing these rules further to block them. The ongoing China-USA trade war focuses on an aspect that bypasses these international rules, especially those that are set by the WTO and prevent China from holding and producing intellectual properties, an area used to maintain the profit in the hegemon country but shifts the labour to outside, like China. With China responding in kind the rules set by the hegemon starts to hurt the hegemon.

On the other side of the balance, the USA doesn't want to maintain its expensive position as a protector and tries to minimise its interventions and expenditures. Being the hegemon while not being on top of the global economy is not maintainable, forcing the USA to both grow economically and contract budgetarily, thus into a paradox.

With the hegemon USA unable to project power to thwart the Chinese advances in the region, the balance of power in the region shifts more and more towards China. With the recent developments, China surpasses the USA in the naval power in the region and catches the USA in the military budget in local currencies, Chinese investments, loans, and aid becoming more common in the region we can see that China is pushing with both carrot and stick. Meanwhile, the USA did not push its hard power in the region further, avoiding conflict and giving way to PLA (People's Liberation Army) and PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy), and limiting its economic aid and investment in the region, opens an area for dominance to Chinese.

The ongoing situation forces regional countries to re-evaluate their allegiances. An active power in the region versus a distant one; a power with years of collaborative past versus a century-old partner reappearing; the new versus the old and many other similar dualities can be found in this situation.

Looking through the history and culture of these countries it is not easy to see which party will emerge as the victor if any and due to the volatility and actively changing status of the situation, it is improbable to state a clear-cut winner to this conflict. But unless the ongoing trend doesn't change on either side it would be prudent to expect the Chinese sphere of influence to expand over the region, decreasing US



presence in the Pacific region visibly. Yet the situation remains on a delicate balance as both sides don't risk an open war nor a proxy war in the region, but the global balance can force either side to show its hard power to convince the rest of the world that the conflict is over, and the victor has emerged; thus, flaring an actual war with devastating results. But as long as there is no war to tip the scales, and no changes in policies over the region by both sides, the status quo will likely benefit China.

As this situation, like many others in ongoing international affairs, has a plethora of actively changing variables, this work can be done numerous times in the future and yield different results depending on these variables. Thus, it is wise to look at this work from the perspective of today and to re-evaluate it further when these events of today become the subject of history.

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