
The Struggle for Influence in the South China Sea: Regional Geopolitical Competition

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea, as one of the main trade routes and a maritime region rich in natural resources, has become the main stage for countries in the Asia Pacific region to compete for political, economic and military influence. This research discusses the phenomenon of power struggles that occur in the South China Sea, the main focus is on geopolitical competition in this strategic region. This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The research results show that competition in the South China Sea involves a complexity of geopolitical, geoeconomic and national interest factors. This region, rich in natural resources, especially oil and gas, is a source of tension between coastal states and external actors. China, as the dominant power in the region, shows high interest in the Nine-Dash Line territorial claims, raising concerns from ASEAN countries and the United States. The complexity of national identities and competition for natural resources creates power imbalances and conflict in the South China Sea. Solutions to overcome these challenges require multilateral cooperation and diplomacy involving all relevant parties, with the aim of achieving peace, security and balance of interests in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the geopolitical situation in the South China Sea region has become increasingly heated along with intense competition between several surrounding countries competing to control an area with abundant resource potential. This tension reached its peak when China asserted its claim to the Nine-Dash Line, which was officially included in the territory of the countries on China's official map (Vujakovic, 2020). This step not only fueled tensions among ASEAN countries, but also stimulated intervention by the United States (US) which supports Japan in the South China Sea conflict, making this region increasingly fraught with uncertainty.

China's controversial claims against the Nine-Dash Line have created an atmosphere of distrust and bitter rivalry among the South China Sea littoral states. ASEAN, as a regional forum, faces significant pressure in maintaining stability in the region, while US intervention through support for its regional partners, such as Japan, also complicates geopolitical dynamics. These tensions raise deep questions about the possibility of diplomatic solutions and regional cooperation. A deep understanding of the root causes of these tensions, as well as their impact on security and stability in the region, is crucial for developing an effective approach to dealing with conflicts in the South China Sea (Chapman, 2016).

China's claims to the South China Sea are used as a driving force to increase its income and economic growth. This area has a significant wealth of underwater heritage, known as Underwater Cultural Heritage, and China is planning the construction of a maritime silk route known as the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (Li & Chang, 2019). China's claims to this region have made the

South China Sea the center of sovereignty and territorial conflicts for decades, due to its complex and historical geopolitical nature (Perez-Alvaro & Forrest, 2018). Thus, the core problems that arise involve two main aspects, namely territorial and maritime sovereignty.

China views the South China Sea as a strategic resource that can support economic growth through the management and exploitation of its abundant natural resources. These steps include ambitious plans such as the construction of a maritime silk route, aimed at strengthening regional connectivity and increasing China's role in global trade and investment. Territorial conflicts in the South China Sea not only involve struggles over economic rights and interests, but also create geopolitical complexities involving history, culture and diplomacy. Therefore, a deep understanding of aspects of territorial and maritime sovereignty is key to overcoming ongoing conflicts in this region, while considering the related economic, political and security implications (Mitchell, 2016).

Changes in global geopolitics are often influenced by the size and extent of a country, and these factors can differentiate one country from another, providing particular advantages to countries that have particular goals and interests regarding the South China Sea. China's large size and territorial extent provides additional strength to the country's position in the South China Sea, triggering responses from neighboring countries towards strengthening China's position in the region. The Philippines, for example, strengthens its military affiliation with the United States (US) through cooperation in the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which is considered a form of legitimacy for US military operations in Philippine territory (Bealey & Johnson, 1999).

Meanwhile, Vietnam is pursuing strategic interests by building and modernizing its military, including engaging in joint exercises with India, as a step to balance China's growing military power, which could raise concerns of dominance in the region (Mitra, 2016). Thus, changes in the global power map, especially involving large powers such as China, play a central role in stimulating strategic responses from neighboring countries. These steps reflect regional countries' efforts to maintain the balance of power in the South China Sea and anticipate the impact of increasingly strong military and geopolitical dominance from other parties.

Apart from military strength, China's economic progress has had a significant influence in the Asia Pacific region. This is illustrated by the shift in the Center of Gravity (CoG) of the global economy from Europe to Asia Pacific (Krishnamohan, 2017). China's influence will certainly bring prosperity, development and stability to the Asia Pacific. China apparently also has strategic relations with the Asia Pacific in terms of security and stability. China and the Asia Pacific countries can be said to have a bond of interdependence, so they have a great responsibility to expand their contribution to the promotion of peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region. Therefore, the Chinese Government promises to realize this goal through various solutions.

This research aims to investigate the impact of power struggles in the South China Sea on geopolitical dynamics and regional security. Through comprehensive analysis, this research aims to make a significant contribution to our understanding of global geopolitical changes and enrich the literature related to regional security in the region.

METHOD

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to explore it. This method is designed to provide a detailed description of the problem being studied by exploring the facts that occurred in order to produce accurate conclusions about the issue being discussed. The main data sources are secondary, including books, scientific journals, and news from newspapers and the internet. Through library research techniques (Yulianah, 2022), this research will focus the search on relevant library data, which will later be investigated, selected and analyzed to obtain in-depth and comprehensive results. The data analysis process will refer to qualitative data analysis techniques,

where the facts found will be explained and connected to each other, forming the basis for drawing solid conclusions. With this approach, it is hoped that this research can make a substantial contribution to the understanding of complex geopolitical issues in the South China Sea.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The South China Sea, a water area and group of islands consisting of two main islands, namely the Spratlys and the Paracels, stretches across a number of countries, covering the route from the Malacca Strait in the west to the Taiwan Strait in the east. With an area of 3.5 million square kilometers, this region is the center of attention because of its abundant natural resources. However, the uniqueness of the South China Sea also creates geopolitical tensions, with several countries such as China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia competing to claim and compete for the region's abundant resources.

Even though Indonesia is not a country that is actively involved in territorial claims in the South China Sea, this country still maintains its territorial sovereignty and monitors claims from neighboring countries. Indonesia's position as a maritime country in this region highlights the complexity of geopolitical dynamics involving a number of countries with diverse interests. While Indonesia may not be directly involved in contesting territorial claims, its role in maintaining stability and managing potential conflict in the South China Sea remains an important element in evolving regional dynamics.

The dispute over the South China Sea region has been a source of protracted tension, reflecting the complex historical aspects of each country's competing claims to this region. For example, the Philippines has documented violations of its territorial waters by Chinese vessels, while similar tensions exist between Vietnam and China. China's maneuvers in the region are largely driven by their belief in ownership of the South China Sea as an integral part of their heritage. While fighting for this historical claim, China is also making the South China Sea an instrument to achieve its ambition to become a global economic power by exploiting the extraordinary potential stored in it.

On the other hand, countries such as Japan, India and the United States did not just passively watch this conflict. They are actively involved in efforts to control the South China Sea region, realizing the great potential it has in supporting their respective national economic growth. This competition creates complexity in geopolitical relations in the region, with countries outside the region trying to ensure access and control of strategic resources and vital trade routes. Overall, the dispute over the South China Sea reflects the complex dynamics of global tensions and competing interests at the regional level, with the potential for major impacts on the balance of power and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Indonesia's involvement in the conflict in the South China Sea mainly began with the publication of the New Map of Malaysia in December 1979, which included Sipadan-Ligitan Island in Malaysian territory. This triggered tensions between Indonesia and Malaysia regarding ownership of the island. This conflict marks Indonesia's active participation in efforts to defend its sovereignty regarding areas in the South China Sea. In 2012, tensions increased further when China issued absolute claims to ownership of all territorial waters, including islands and archipelagos in the South China Sea (Roza et al., 2013). Indonesia feels threatened by this claim, especially because the Natuna region is considered an integral part of Indonesia's sovereignty. Stability in the Natuna sea area and the smooth running of international trade are the main focus of Indonesia's concerns.

Indonesia has firmly rejected China's claim that it has violated Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Natuna region. In 2016, Indonesia increased sea and air patrols around Natuna in response to the presence of Chinese ships which were considered to be violating Indonesia's maritime boundaries. At the diplomatic level, Indonesia is also involved in dialogue and negotiations with related parties to find a peaceful solution to this tension. Conflicts in the South

China Sea, especially in the context of China's claims, remain one of the main challenges to maritime security and stability in the region. Indonesia continues to strive to defend its sovereignty and promote a just and peaceful settlement so that its national interests are maintained amidst complex geopolitical tensions.

In fact, the lack of cooperation among several countries around the South China Sea has created major challenges in unifying national perceptions and shared interests. The imbalance of power that occurs between these countries, as stated by Bai & Hu (2016), is a direct result of the lack of collaboration and cooperation in dealing with conflicts in this region. The difficulty of reaching a joint agreement also reflects the complexity of geopolitics, where the national interests and identity of each country are determining factors that are difficult to reconcile.

Geopolitics, as a science that integrates geographical analysis and regulation of a country's politics, economy, military and culture, has a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of conflict in the South China Sea (Mitchell, 2016). The inability to reach mutual agreement creates uncertainty in effective policy settings and can accelerate the potential for conflict escalation. Additionally, differences in national perceptions and identities create significant obstacles in formulating solutions that are acceptable to all parties. In dealing with these complex dynamics, regional and international coordination efforts become increasingly important. Involving dialogue, diplomacy and joint efforts to find just and sustainable solutions are necessary steps to overcome geopolitical challenges and power imbalances in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea plays a very large strategic role in the context of global trade, where around a third of the world's maritime trade value, totaling more than 3 trillion dollars annually, passes through this region. The existence of this vital trade route makes the South China Sea the center of economic continuity and global connectivity. In addition, this region holds abundant marine resources, which contribute significantly to the food security of millions of people around Southeast Asia (Hayton, 2019). The abundant marine products in the South China Sea are an important foundation for the regional fisheries sector and are an integral part of meeting the food needs of people in the region.

Apart from the sustainability of marine resources, the seabed of the South China Sea is also considered to have great potential for oil and gas reserves that can support global energy needs. The existence of these natural resources has given rise to strategic interest from countries around the region, strengthening the complexity of the geopolitical dynamics occurring in the South China Sea. Therefore, understanding and assessing the potential of this region from a geopolitical perspective is crucial in designing policies and maintaining stability in the region.

From a geopolitical perspective, the potential of the South China Sea can be interpreted through its strategic position as a vital sea and trade route. Located between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, this region is the main connection point connecting East Asia with various parts of the world, including India, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. As a major sea route, the South China Sea is a critical transportation route that helps facilitate around a third of the world's total sea trade. Its unique geopolitical position shows strategic importance for countries that can control and exploit this sea route (Gau, 2012). Understanding and control of this region allows a country to take control over trade and shipping flows, exerting a major influence on the global economy and security.

In a geoeconomic context, the potential of the South China Sea can also be translated through the natural riches it contains, such as marine products and natural gas reserves. These natural resources are valuable assets that support economic sustainability and energy growth in the region (Junef, 2018). The ability of countries around the South China Sea to manage and exploit the potential of these natural resources not only influences regional economic stability, but also plays an important role in global economic competition. Therefore, the geoeconomic potential of the South

China Sea has a significant impact in determining the dynamics of economic and energy policies at regional and international levels.

Competition in the South China Sea region has a troubling impact not only on maritime security, but also on overall peace, stability and security in the region. The main interests of coastal states relate to the determination of maritime boundaries, the defense of territorial sovereignty, and the right to manage and exploit the region's abundant resources. Competition for these territorial claims is the main driver of conflict, which poses serious challenges in maintaining stability and peace in the South China Sea. Not only is this a bilateral problem, this competition also affects relations between countries in the Asia Pacific region, forming complex geopolitical dynamics (Darajati & Adolf, 2018).

On the other hand, many countries outside the South China Sea region have interests focused on the security of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC), or sea lines of communication. This sea line of communication is crucial in national geopolitical strategy, because it involves the main maritime route used for trade, logistics and naval interests. In this context, competition in the South China Sea becomes increasingly significant in the context of global security, because it can affect the smooth running of international maritime transportation and result in large economic impacts. Therefore, joint efforts to maintain security and stability in this region are an urgent need, not only to protect the interests of coastal countries but also to maintain the smooth running of SLOC which affects global security and stability .

Over the course of the history of international relations, resource-rich areas have always been a source of dispute and conflict. China, as one of the fastest growing global economic powers, is showing increasing interest in resources and energy security to support its rapid economic growth. In this context, China pays special attention to the resources found in the South China Sea region, which is rich in marine products and is considered to have significant oil and gas reserves (Laksmi et al, 2022). This economic motivation has become one of the main drivers of competition and tension in the region, as countries compete to access and manage abundant resources.

On the other hand, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member countries are trying to find ways to develop their economies. One strategy taken is selling natural resource products as a fast and effective method. However, due to overlapping economic interests in the same region, especially related to resource claims in the South China Sea, competition and disputes are inevitable. The complexity of these dynamics creates significant challenges in achieving balance and peace in the region, given the diverse national interests involved.

The potential for significant oil and natural gas reserves beneath the seabed of the South China Sea region has become the focus of great attention for neighboring countries in Asia in recent decades. In April 1969, two geographers, KO Emery of the University of South California and Hyroshi Niino of the Tokyo University of Fisheries, published a paper entitled "Sediments of the Gulf of Thailand and Adjacent Continental Shelf." This paper is a starting point that shows the existence of large amounts of oil and gas storage in the South China Sea. Since then, the region has become a center of strategic interest, with surrounding countries competing to access and manage its abundant natural resources.

Although these potential oil and gas reserves are of interest, precise statistics on these deposits are difficult to obtain accurately. This is due to technical limitations and the tense political situation in this region. Both the Chinese government and United States research institutions present their own estimated data, however, due to the complex nature of geopolitics, uncertainty continues to color the true picture of oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea. Competition for control and use of these natural resources has complicated regional dynamics, creating ongoing challenges in achieving agreement and stability in the region.

CONCLUSION

Competition in the South China Sea reflects the geopolitical and geoeconomic complexities that influence international South China Sea, Geopolitics, Region, China, ASEAN, United States. al relations in the region. This region, which is rich in natural resources, especially oil and gas, has become the center of attention of neighboring countries and global powers. Competing territorial claims, exploitation rights, and control of maritime trade routes create tensions and conflicts among coastal states and external actors. China's involvement, as the dominant power in the region, in the Nine-Dash Line claims and increased military activities in the South China Sea have raised concerns, especially from ASEAN countries and the United States. The potential for conflict is further exacerbated by the complexity of national identity, geopolitics, and geoeconomics, where natural resource and strategic interests compete with each other. Countries in the region, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, are seeking to protect their territorial sovereignty while pursuing the economic potential contained in the South China Sea. On the other hand, countries outside the region, including the United States and Japan, are involved in efforts to ensure the smooth running of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) and counterbalance Chinese influence. In conclusion, the complexity and tensions in the South China Sea create major challenges for security and stability in the region. The solution to resolve this conflict requires dialogue, diplomacy and multilateral cooperation involving all relevant parties. In an effort to achieve peace and balance of interests, regional and global cooperation is the key to managing the complex dynamics in the South China Sea.

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