

# South China Sea: Dracophobia and the Lilliputian Dilemma in a Gulliverian (China) Neighbourhood

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## Abstract

*The South China Sea (SCS) holds massive historical significance as the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific Region. The SCS holds immense economic and strategic importance, with its sea lanes facilitating over 80 per cent of international trade, making it vital for countries' commercial and security interests. The rise of China and the consequent geopolitical response from the United States (US) makes the region strategically alluring for both the ruling as well as the rising power. Furthermore, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), involving India, Japan, Australia, and the US, has the potential to counter China's expansionist ambitions and uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific. This US-China dynamic elevates the stakes for the smaller states within the region. China, recognising the strategic significance of the SCS for its national interests, has publicly designated the region as a matter of fundamental importance. Consequently, neighbouring countries have become increasingly concerned about Beijing's alleged ambitions of transforming the area into a Chinese-dominated sphere as Beijing wants to be Godzilla of Asia. This prevailing dracophobia in the region has led to a series of miscalculations and sporadic disputes. Consequently, the SCS is evolving into the most vibrant and contentious geopolitical hotspot. It is in this context that this article analyses the Lilliputian dilemma among the smaller regional neighbours of Gulliverian world.*

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## Introduction

The countries of Southeast Asia hold a strong emphasis on sovereignty, making the principle of non-intervention a cornerstone of their foreign and interregional relations. In addition to being a vital hub for trade and transportation, Southeast Asia encompasses crucial sea lanes of communication, accounting for 32 per cent of global oil net trade and 27 per cent of global gas net trade.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that the regional countries are highly protective of their maritime rights. Unfortunately, as Mark Valencia astutely observes that “when Asian nations think of the maritime domain, their focus tends to gravitate towards boundary conflicts rather than the preservation of the declining marine environment or the management of dwindling fisheries”.<sup>2</sup> The South China Sea (SCS) disputes and border conflicts among the regional states have elevated the region to be a primary concern for China. Moreover, due to Southeast Asia’s geopolitically pivotal location as a bridge connecting two oceans and two continents—Oceania and Asia—it becomes an alluring region for an emerging global power like China. Consequently, the region has experienced significant political shifts and the emergence of new security risks.<sup>3</sup> Despite the historical grievances and longstanding territorial disputes, the ongoing maritime claims are now placing strain on the previously successful regional security structure.<sup>4</sup> Chinese assertiveness in the SCS not only presents significant geopolitical challenges for regional and extra-regional powers, like the US, but also elicits a range of counter-responses. The region finds itself at a critical juncture where the actions and intentions of China have far-reaching implications for the stability and security of Southeast Asia and beyond.

## China’s Growing Geopolitical Assertiveness in SCS: Unpacking the Implications

The SCS holds immense historical significance as the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific Region. With the rise of diplomacy and a rapidly expanding global economy, the strategic allure of this region is expected to increase. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), over 80 per cent of all international trade in 2021 was conducted through waterways, with Asia accounting for 54 per cent of global maritime trade.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the SCS is evolving into the most vibrant and contentious geopolitical hotspot. Territorial and sovereignty disputes plague the region, with conflicting claims over islands, rocks, reefs,

territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the seabed. Additionally, military and maritime activities in the region as well as concerns about environmental degradation further contribute to the volatile nature of the area. China, recognising the strategic significance of the SCS for its national interests, has publicly designated the region as a matter of fundamental importance.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Beijing is unwavering when it comes to its core interests, as evident in its assertive maritime manoeuvres. The Chinese claims over the SCS have created a complex web of intractable challenges, stretching from the Cold War era to present-day assertions. Historical incidents, such as the attacks on Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Fieri Cross Reef in 1988, as well as conflicts with the Philippines over the Mischief Reef in 1995, demonstrate the long-standing tensions. More recent events, including armed skirmishes in the Scarborough Shoal in 2015 and encounters involving vessels like the Impeccable and the USNS Bowditch, further underscore the unstable and intricate nature of the region.<sup>7</sup> China's unwavering stance on its indisputable sovereignty based on historic rights, along with its nine/eleven dotted line claims, contributes to the complexities and challenges surrounding the SCS. Through this line, China claims 90 per cent of the territory of the SCS and if acknowledged by others, its neighbouring countries had observed that this would create, to use Graham Allison's words, a 'South China Lake'.<sup>8</sup> The region remains a simmering tinderbox, with the potential for significant geopolitical consequences.

China's military innovations, long-term investments in coast guard capabilities, and expansive commercial maritime assets have significantly enhanced its ability to exert influence in the SCS region. Consequently, neighbouring countries have become increasingly concerned about Beijing's alleged ambitions of transforming the area into a Chinese-dominated sphere. This prevailing 'dracophobia' in the region has led to a series of miscalculations and sporadic disputes.<sup>9</sup> Recognising the geopolitical significance of the SCS, China has been steadily increasing its naval presence, viewing the sea as a second Persian Gulf.<sup>10</sup> The potential oil resources near the Spratly Islands alone are estimated to range from 105 billion to 213 billion barrels, with gas reserves varying from 266 trillion to over 2,000 trillion cubic feet.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the Spratly Islands issue, Beijing maintains a stance of subscribing to no multilateral consultations, no internationalisation of the

dispute, and no specification of claims. Recent developments further exemplify China's efforts to solidify its presence in the region. For instance, China has deployed an early warning radar system at Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly archipelago, bolstering its installations there. In addition, off the West coast of the Philippines, China maintains a naval presence at Mischief Reef.<sup>12</sup> These strategic moves by China have raised concerns among neighbouring countries, intensifying tensions and exacerbating the already complex dynamics in the SCS. It is these countries who face challenges like 'Lilliputians' when dealing with a much larger and more powerful neighbour China, who on the other hand is like 'Gulliver' in the land of Lilliput, like a dominant and influential force in the neighbourhood.

The US's interests in the SCS are increasingly at risk. Washington has a profound and enduring interest in ensuring that sea lines of communication remain open to all states for both, commercial and peaceful military activities. The control exerted by China over the near-seas region could have significant implications for the security framework of the Indo-Pacific Region. It particularly raises concerns about the US's ability to fulfil its obligations to Taiwan as outlined in the Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it could create challenges in meeting its commitments under regional security and defence treaties, especially with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. Furthermore, Chinese control over the SCS could impede the US's capacity to manoeuvre its forces in the Western Pacific for various reasons. This includes maintaining regional stability, fulfilling engagement and partnership-building responsibilities, managing crises, and executing war plans. Washington's primary interest lies in safeguarding the rights to navigate, overfly, and conduct military exercises within waters that Beijing claims as its own. The increasing risks to the US interests in the SCS have far-reaching implications for regional security and stability. It underscores the complex dynamics and potential challenges that arise from China's assertive actions in the region, prompting Washington to closely monitor and respond to developments to protect its strategic and security concerns.

India, as another significant regional power, is increasingly concerned about China's growing military assertiveness in the SCS and its implications for international marine resources. Although India does not have a direct territorial claim in the SCS, sea lanes have become crucial for its expanding commercial links

with Southeast Asian countries. During the 15th East Asia Summit in Nov 2020, India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, expressed New Delhi's apprehensions regarding China's claims in the region. He highlighted that Chinese actions in the SCS have undermined trust in ongoing negotiations for a proposed code of conduct in the region.<sup>14</sup> This reflects India's deep-seated concerns about the evolving security dynamics in the SCS. Given that approximately 55 percent of India's trade with the Indo-Pacific Region transits through the SCS, New Delhi perceives itself as a key player in the region's security dynamics.<sup>15</sup> Any volatility, or instability, in the SCS poses a direct risk to India's trade and economic activities, further emphasising its stake in the region's evolving security landscape. India's concerns align with its broader strategic interests in maintaining stability, safeguarding maritime trade routes, and ensuring a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific Region. As a result, India too closely monitors developments in the SCS and seeks to actively engage in regional discussions to protect its economic and security interests.

### **Regional and International Response to Chinese Assertiveness**

China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS has caused alarm not only within the region but also among the global community. The US has been vocal in opposing Beijing's actions in the region and has demonstrated its opposition through freedom of navigation operations.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, the US conducted 10 of these operations, compared to eight in 2019 and six in 2018. Australia and Japan have also joined in expressing their concerns and have taken similar action. Japan, to enhance the maritime security of the Philippines and Vietnam, has provided them with military weapons and ships.<sup>17</sup> Most regional countries have expressed their apprehensions regarding China's actions in the SCS. President Joe Biden and his administration have largely supported the policies of the previous Trump administration by emphasising that any Chinese maritime claims conflicting with the 2016 arbitration tribunal decision are unlawful.<sup>18</sup> In addition to increasing naval operations, Biden has reaffirmed the US's treaty obligations that require Washington to act in the event of an attack on Philippines' forces in the SCS. The recent visit of the US Secretary of Defence, L Austin, to Manila further demonstrates the Biden administration's commitment to these objectives. It is worth noting that the Philippines, despite being one of the most assertive claimants in Southeast Asia, under President Rodrigo Duterte had previously

pursued closer ties with Beijing and distanced itself from the US. However, during Secretary Austin's visit, Duterte reversed his decision to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement which allows easier entry of US military forces into the Philippines.<sup>19</sup> This shift has revitalised the US-Philippine alliance and pushed Washington into a stronger position to counter China's aggressive actions in the region.

The Biden administration should seize the opportunity to lay the foundation for a global alliance that upholds a maritime order based on norms. This can be achieved through various means. Firstly, the administration can enhance short-term deterrence by supporting the Philippines in upgrading its military capabilities, and considering the rotational deployment of American military resources, particularly missile platforms, in the region. By doing so, it can demonstrate a commitment to the security of its allies and partners in the SCS. In addition to strengthening short-term deterrence, the Biden administration should also focus on long-term strategies. This involves exerting economic and diplomatic pressure on Beijing to encourage a peaceful and suitable resolution of maritime conflicts. By utilising economic leverage and diplomatic channels, the administration can emphasise the importance of adherence to international law and norms in the SCS. This approach aims to create an environment conducive to constructive dialogue and negotiation, reducing the risk of further escalation. Furthermore, the US can work towards promoting multilateral cooperation and engagement in the region. It should actively engage with like-minded countries and stakeholders to form a united front in support of a rules-based maritime order. By building alliances and partnerships, the Biden administration can increase its influence and collective leverage to address the challenges posed by China's assertiveness. Overall, the Biden administration has an opportunity to establish a comprehensive approach that combines short-term deterrence with long-term economic and diplomatic pressures.<sup>20</sup> This approach, combined with fostering global alliances and promoting multilateral cooperation, can contribute to the maintenance of stability and the pursuit of a peaceful resolution to maritime conflicts in the SCS.

Vietnam has maintained a consistent and firm stance on the SCS dispute in recent years. It has consistently rejected new Chinese claims to sovereignty through diplomatic means and improved its defences in the Spratly Islands covertly.<sup>21</sup> Despite

Chinese efforts to obstruct offshore oil and gas exploration, Vietnam has persisted in retaining its rights to such resources. However, Vietnam has been hesitant to mobilise global support for the Southeast Asian cause in the SCS dispute, preferring to let other countries, particularly the Philippines, bear the costs of openly criticising Beijing.<sup>22</sup> This is where the role of the US becomes crucial. If Washington displays a willingness to act and builds on the momentum created by the recent visit of the US Defence Secretary to the Philippines, it can help overcome the hesitance of countries like Vietnam. In addition to encouraging regional claimants, the US can utilise the QUAD to counter China's expansionist maritime ambitions in the SCS. The QUAD has initiated the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness to monitor and address illicit activities in the Indo-Pacific, such as dark shipping and illicit fishing.<sup>23</sup> This effort has the potential to significantly enhance the partners' capacity to comprehensively monitor the waters and uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, more action is needed, and the onus lies on the QUAD to prevent China's SCS ambitions from turning the region into a Chinese-dominated entity. This is crucial for the QUAD to maintain its credibility as a force for promoting and upholding the rule-based order.

The SCS has become a geopolitical tinderbox within the Indo-Pacific security architecture. China's assertive maritime manoeuvres, claiming nearly the entire region, have put the SCS under pressure, affecting smaller regional powers as well as extra-regional powers like the US and India. Smaller countries are compelled to challenge Chinese claims, and the US has been reaffirming its commitments to promoting and upholding a rule-based order. The US, along with its strategic partners in the QUAD, needs to take the lead in pushing back against Chinese assertiveness. While there are collective efforts underway to counter Beijing's unilateral moves, more must be done to prevent the SCS from becoming a virtual Chinese lake.<sup>24</sup> If the US and its partners fail to act, the principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific and the rule-based order will face serious challenges. It is imperative to take action to avoid dire consequences not only for the smaller regional countries but also for the US and India, which have significant geopolitical stakes in the SCS.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the SCS remains a highly contested and complex region with significant geopolitical implications. China's growing

assertiveness in asserting its claims and expanding its maritime influence has raised concerns among regional countries, as well as the global community, including India. The US, along with its strategic partners like India, Japan, and Australia, has been vocal in opposing Beijing's actions and upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. The dynamics in the SCS have led to various responses, including freedom of navigation operations, military support to regional claimants, and efforts to build alliances and multilateral cooperation. However, more needs to be done to address the challenges posed by China's assertiveness and prevent the region from becoming a Chinese-dominated entity. The involvement of smaller regional claimants, such as Vietnam, and their collaboration with larger powers like the US play a crucial role in shaping the future of the SCS. The QUAD has an opportunity to enhance maritime security and uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, collective efforts should continue to strengthen, ensuring that the principles of a rule-based order are maintained, and China's unilateral moves are effectively challenged. It is essential for the international community to recognise the significance of the SCS and actively engage in finding peaceful and diplomatic resolutions to the disputes. By promoting dialogue, adherence to international law, and fostering cooperation, a stable and secure SCS can be achieved, benefiting not only the regional countries but also the global order.

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