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Balancing Interests in the SCS

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After the Vietnam War in 1975, the process of reunification between North and South Vietnam was implemented. While it was happening, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam government faced the expansionism of the Republic of China and its frictions with URSS (Communist supremacy). This resulted in the appearance of different kinds of frictions in the South China Sea (SCS), a relevant maritime space because of its geographic location, interconnecting the east and west of Asia, the Pacific, Europe and Africa; conferring it a high international, political, economic and social influence.

In the beginning of 1976, Vietnam exercised its foreign policy within the context of ideological alignment (USSR and China), leading to slow socio - economic development. It was in the year 1986 that influenced by economic globalization, the Communist Party of Vietnam (PCV) approved commercial reforms of Doi Moi (renovation), which allowed greater economic growth, modernization and extension of diplomatic relations among Vietnam and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Therefore, the economic growth in the Asia Pacific region, the overlapping national interests, and the territorial disputes in Southeast Asia are components for the destabilization risk in the SCS. These issues include new actors, as the ASEAN, which is a multilateral organization that was established in 1967, whose political support is aimed at seeking bilateral agreements based on international legal parameters (maintenance of the status quo, economic and social SCS development).

Consequently, ASEAN is a multinational organization that can achieve a high impact on the determinations of its circumscribed countries, in relation to economic, political and sociological processes. However, it has not been effective concerning the enforcement or implementation of systematic or arranged solutions related to territorial disputes in the SCS.

To Vietnam, China and other various actors, such as Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, have national interests engaged in the mentioned maritime regions. Thus, they have developed methods to strengthen military capabilities, of which the greatest increase has been represented in the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹

This essay focuses its attention on the possible factors of balance, the impact of the United States, the possibility of reaching agreements and a preponderance of leverage by Vietnam. In the short term, ASEAN can "press" a safe environment (stability in the South Sea of China) in the exercise of navigational rights, economic exchange and enjoyment of the property and resources generated by the sea; but, in the medium and long term, it must incorporate the international order (the International Court of Justice [ICJ] and UN) for reaching agreements to settle the territorial disputes.

Considering the increase of the military investment in Southeast Asia, the expanding of interest in the named spaces, and the economic environment, the author's thesis is that ASEAN and Vietnam cooperative strategies by themselves will not exert a decisive effect on the security, the mutual interests, and the stabilization of that region.

GENERALITIES

To begin this work, the South China Sea is located in Southeast Asia, stretching from Singapore to the Strait of Taiwan, and the islands of Borneo and the Philippines archipelago, comprising an area of approximately 3,500,000 km square, and is the confluence point to 230 islands, islets, rocks and reefs, called the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which are the subject of disputes between China, Vietnam and many ASEAN members.²

This region is defined as the world's second most valuable zone, because about 66% of crude imports from South Korea, 60% of oil supplies from Japan and Taiwan, and approximately 80% of China's energy importations passes across the South China Sea.³ Moreover, its geographic position supports an important annually estimated trade flow of U.S. \$ 5.3 trillion, of which U.S. \$ 1.2 trillion accruing directly from the United States.⁴

Additionally, the discovery of oil in the year 1976 on the coast of Palawan (Spratly Islands) introduced the possibility of significant sources of energy resources in the SCS, adding a new element of interest; in the medium and long term it may lead to instability. The above is based on high energy dependence of developing countries. Vietnam's and China's daily oil consumption are estimated at 321,500 barrels and 9,400,000 respectively.⁵ A question arises: Will the rising energy needs kick off many conflicts in the future decades?

THE ROLE OF VIETNAM

Vietnam argues that there is sufficient background to ratify the rights of sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel islands. It has historical records, maps and documents, including geographical studies of the islands in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, in the year 1933, France annexed those spaces to its territory⁶ and, also, during the Second World War (1939), Japan decided on the importance of controlling sea lines of communication in the SCS. Based on this, it ventured to conquer the Spratly islands with immediate opposition from France, the ruler of that time

After the Second World War, the peace treaty of San Francisco was agreed on in 1951, in which the Japanese empire expressly waived the right over the islands in dispute with France (Spratly and Paracel). The treaty, however, was vague and did not specify to whom the legal right existed to exercise sovereignty in that space, leading to different interpretations and ambiguities.⁷

Over the past 70 years, the SCS has been the scene of occupations, offensive actions and naval exercises by many countries. The most significant actions, are listed below: a) 1946, China captured Itu Alba in the Spratly and Paracel Phu Lan; b) January 19, 1974, the PRC made an offensive on South Vietnamese troops stationed in the Paracel Islands; c) on February 8, 1987, March 14, 1987 and February 14, 1988, there were clashes of low and high intensity between naval units of the PRC and Vietnam in the Spratly Islands Area, causing losses of ships and human resources, with greater affect on the Vietnam Armed Forces.⁸

Therefore, the search for the prevalence of China in those maritime areas and their offensive approach had increased tension in the area, bringing the struggle to a new level. Despite interest from Vietnam, it didn't serve as a catalyst for the direct intervention of a world power against China (USA and the Soviet Union were in the middle of the Cold War, and the arisen divergences between the two communist countries).⁹

In 1975 the political government of Vietnam set up the political goal to exercise g the sovereignty in areas considered historically and geographically theirs by deploying occupation forces to the islands and increasing its presence in Southeast Asia (segments of Spratly islands).¹⁰ It also reorganized the political distribution, annexing the islands to the province of Khanh Ha.¹¹

In 1982 UN member states agreed to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS is a legal order for the seas and oceans to facilitate international communication and would promote peaceful uses such as the equitable and efficient use of resources and the study, protection and preservation of the marine environment and its living resources.¹² It also established legal regulations over territorial seas, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), contiguous zones (CZ), and continental shelves (PC).

Since 1988 Vietnam and China have increased interaction processes and the exercise of sovereignty in the areas obtained through political or military force. In parallel ways, they have implemented different levels of dialogue and negotiations to search for joint solutions to achieve agreements to the delimitation of the sea, EEZ and continental shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin. On December 25, 2000, an agreement was accepted by both sides.¹³

In 1995, Vietnam joined ASEAN and created a paradoxical circumstance of balance in favor of Vietnam, by turning the disputes from the bilateral concept to the multilateral process when it involved regional diplomatic efforts (incorporating various actors to that topic) and seeking to restore confidence and to achieve decisive agreements in such disputes. Nonetheless, there is no consensus among the members of ASEAN. It lacks significant credibility, and actually it is not running effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Of late, Vietnam has increased investment in defense (2.27 million in 2012),¹⁴ and through diplomacy has strengthened political and economic cooperation (the Doi Moi reforms also brought about a rise of the Vietnamese economy). Vietnam is also expanding its cooperation with ASEAN and the United States, creating both a deterrent and a stabilizing effect in the SCS.

On June 21, 2012, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed the Law of the Sea, in which it reaffirmed the sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, resulting in a series of claims by China, creating a problematic catalytic effect. Vietnam seized the opportunity to be assisted by outside arbitration, in the same way as the Philippines came to the UNCLOS, in order to integrate an international justice and dispute settlement mechanism to settle territorial disputes with China (Japan supported that initiative).¹⁵ Ultimately, Vietnam is facing a problem where possible sources of solutions

are linked to external support (USA, UN, and ASEAN, among others); therefore, the intent of the VN government aims to strengthen its international and diplomatic relationships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA (CHINA VISION)

During the course of history, by diverse factors, the PRC has lost many sea and land areas, among them the Japanese conquest of Manchuria and the Shandong Peninsula. The extraterritoriality agreements and various treaties with Great Britain, France, Japan and Russia, among others, have caused loss of space.¹⁶ In addition, the problem of disparity with Taiwan, are matters of national interest and convergence (Chinese nationalism) that shape China's foreign policy. Consequently, the recovery of lost spaces and reunification between China and Taiwan are a national priority.¹⁷

For Beijing, the ancient presence of the PRC inferred a historic sovereignty over the entire extension of the SCS, a process that in accordance with its political and economic interests has been the motive of territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its peripheral environment. The PRC Territorial disputes are "a) China, Indonesia and Taiwan over the Northeast Natuna Islands; b) China, Philippines and Taiwan over the Malampaya gas fields Camago; c) China, Philippines and Taiwan on Scarborough Reef; d) China, Vietnam and Taiwan over waters west of the Spratly Islands and e) China, Vietnam and Taiwan disputes over the Paracel Islands."¹⁸

Over the past 40 years, China has achieved four major strategic outcomes: the first, being admitted as a permanent member of the UN in 1971; the second, the opening of miscellaneous methods of economic development, which "positioned it in 2011 as the second largest economy"¹⁹ (during 2013, the GDP of China has increased to U.S. \$6.3 trillion);²⁰ and third, the development of strategic capacities due to the rising defense budget (for example, in 2012, it was US\$106,400 million, equivalent to 1.28 % of Gross Domestic Product);²¹ and fourth, the developing political will of the Chinese nation, aimed at safeguarding the named territorial integrity and national unity.

China's dependence on the SCS is rising: 50% of its economy depends on international trade, and 80 % of China's energy imports cross by the South China Sea. Its exports to the U.S. have reached the amount of U.S. \$ 237.1 billion, and to Japan U.S. \$100 billion, and for EU U.S. \$ 239.7 billion²². Therefore, the PRC in accordance with its political will has outlined its sea vision and projected its hegemonic role in the SCS.²³

Beginning in 1974, China carried out military offensive actions against the Vietnam Army in the SCS (already registered in the vision of Vietnam), which shows a more accurate reading of "the maritime vision of China" leading it to changes in China's strategic doctrine.²⁴ Also, the development, strengthening and modernization of the PLA Navy, has given them more flexibility, deterrence and exponential growth of resources. An example of this is the modernization and refit of the Aircraft Carrier Liaoning, the future project for manufacturing Chinese aircraft carrier, and the process of consolidation of deterrent forces through the activation of a nuclear submarine fleet.²⁵

Although China is a political and economic power, the former military offensive actions against Vietnam in the Spratly Islands, the conducting of naval exercises in the SCS and the collected military power, among other factors, have undermined the credibility of and confidence in China. However, these factors did not move PRC away from the realization of its national objectives: recovering territory and reunification of Taiwan, achieving a hegemonic position, continued strengthening of its military capabilities and fulfilling central political influence inside the ASEAN.

Therefore, the SCS acquires full significance in political and economic vital national interest." That is why, in 2009, Beijing (legitimization strategy) handed to the UN the document entitled "Nine Dashed Lines" (not validated by the International Hydrographic Bureau of the UN),²⁶ in which the entire SCS appears as a China maritime extension, and where PRC stands out "there is not discussion about sovereignty in those points as those marine areas belong to PRC from facto."²⁷

The multilateral concerted agreements are not an option for the Chinese view as it would indicate a turning point as opposed to national interests (it may cause the onset of multiple legal trials and incorporate divergent actors, including India, Japan, Vietnam and Philippines). Thus, their vision is oriented to design and achieve bilateral agreements, through deterrence, in order to create the way for the region's hegemony recognition, and, in fact, ensure compliance of national objectives.

THE ASEAN, THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND THE UNITED STATES GENERAL VIEW

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in Bangkok on August 8, 1967, originally formed by Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. In 1984 Brunei was annexed; Vietnam in 1995; Laos and Myanmar in 1997; and Cambodia in 1999. The overall goal is to promote economic development in the region and to work together for the promotion of peace and political stability of its member countries.²⁸

ASEAN, only nine years after its creation began to play a more decisive role. In 1976 it made the first summit of Heads of State in Bali, signing the first Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Thereafter it developed periodic summits for analyzing regional concerns. The fundamental principles of the organization stresses "respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity, the right of every state to lead its national existence free from extreme interference, subversion or coercion, noninterference in internal affairs, the solution of differences or disputes by peaceful means, the renunciation of the threat or use of force, and effective cooperation."²⁹

Globalization has caused the rise of new alliances, developing regional and international interaction; for ASEAN the challenge is to achieve a significant leadership for setting the course, the participation rules, and the availability to impose sanctions and exercise greater authority in the SCS. The ASEAN, as an Association of Nations must become a multidimensional system, creating decisive and desired effects in the political, economic, social, and security dimensions, such as the SCS. Also, externally it should be the pivot for cooperation to other countries like the USA, Japan, or Russia; and consequently, a reliable cooperation element with homologous structures such as the UN, IAEA, and other multilateral organizations.³⁰

Amid all these territorial disputes, the principle of ASEAN has been in seeking agreements, through dialogue, diplomatic approaches and receiving any complaints of violations of the agreements reached at the ASEAN summits. For example, the statement of conduct for peace, which since 2002 is a matter of dialogue and consensus;³¹ although, in the 12 years since accepted, it has not been tangible and effective. Additionally, when ASEAN is probing about SCS disputes, it leads to the appearance of divisions inside ASEAN.³²

Similarly, China and ASEAN signed measures of confidence building. However, the measures and summits are not mandatory and have had limited impact.³³ For example, historical interactions to this date record 23 ASEAN summits, 16 ASEAN summit – China, one summit of ASEAN +3 (three partners in Northeast Asia: China, Japan and Korea);³⁴ though, the overarching outcomes have been minimal.

Although the main actor on arbitration (the Law of the Sea) is the UNCLOS, the International Court of Justice, depending on the type of litigation is another option available (Vietnam and the Philippines attended the ICJ in 2012). Then ASEAN can be constituted as the catalyst in territorial claims. Unfortunately, the lack of consensus among its members and the development of agreements without tangible results on the SCS undermine the ASEAN credibility (Cambodia case).

The development of bilateral cooperation represents a significant advance in terms of regional stability as it is becoming feasible to reach agreements. Four constituent successful examples are the 2009 Singapore - Vietnam Defense Cooperation Agreement, the 2009 Australia - Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, the Gulf of Tonkin agreement between China and Vietnam, and the establishment of an investigation company and oilfield service between China and Brunei.³⁵

On the other hand, legal considerations, which are the responsibility of UNCLOS (not supported by the USA, but signed by China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam), included

covenanted laws which add more precise definitions about delineation of the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone, the continental shelves, islands, archipelagoes, and freedom of navigation. It may serve as the starting point for the UN intervention, which can be leveraged by ASEAN, through an indirect approach of the USA.

Hence, ASEAN may be the thread needed to integrate SCS multidimensional efforts, only if there is a linear approximation or an indirect coercion by the United States in its ability for influencing the ASEAN (through Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and especially Vietnam). Such a partnership would be oriented to achieve a chameleonic transformation, enabling it to arrive at solutions and consensual agreements about the exploration and exploitation of potential energy resources, the integration of efforts against various and globalized threats, and to address the course and keep the status quo in the SCS.

Besides ASEAN, other mechanisms or international organizations, which have the potential to influence the above purposes, are: The Summit of East Asian regions, the meeting of defense ministers of ASEAN and the Dialogue of Shangri - the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization or SEATO and the Five Power Defense Arrangements or FPDA.

However, the presence of the United States, by its strategic role conferred for the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) through the deployment of forces in the Asian region, is constituted as a deterrent force, which currently limits the escalation of the conflict as a stabilizer pivot impacting on SCS and adjoining maritime spaces. There is a confluence of maritime interests; it can be inferred, "the close relation between sea control and the fate of war on land, and inside the oceans will determine the future of the powers (A. Mahan)."³⁶

The strategy of USPACOM in the region is set as "its efforts contribution to rebalancing the region, the desired end state is: in accordance with national guidance the D.E.S is that Asia - Pacific is secure and prosperous, underpinned by U.S. leadership and a rules-based international order, to obtain that goal, is necessary strengthen alliances and partnerships, and maintain an assured presence in the region."³⁷

Then, the question arising is: How can the USA have more interaction in ASEAN, so as not to affect the sensitivity of China and its deeply rooted nationalism without destabilizing the SCS? The answer from the academic point of view is aligned with the cooperation opportunities, to reach bilateral agreements, develop combined operations, and other practices and actions needed to address the multilateral global threats presented in this geographic area (terrorism, piracy, weapons of mass destruction, trafficking, smuggling, and climatic change).

Consequently, the USA's desired goal is the maintenance of the status quo in the SCS; therefore, the military presence of the United States is essential and imperative, and it is also supported by the mutual defense agreements among USA, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, and for some treaties which have had prevalence since the Cold War. Otherwise, China would most likely be exercising additional political pressure and trying to become deterrent in that area.

Additionally, the presence of nuclear threats in adjacent areas, the potential processes of scientific research on plutonium and highly enriched uranium are worldwide concerns. The BBC News wrote: "Among Pyongyang's recent inflated threats, and the announced intention to (readjust and restart) its nuclear facilities is the most worrisome."³⁸ On the other hand, the nuclear submarine training of the PRC in the SCS and the capabilities of the Russian and Indian fleets, induce the support of the United States in stabilization processes in the SCS.

The other influencing and stabilizing elements are the trade dependence among states interacting in the SCS. "In fact, \$5.3 trillion of trade passes through the South China Sea."³⁹ This condition is fully influenced by the economy; in this order of ideas, despite the various differences, there is a strong economic link. This means that staggering the conflict in the current period would directly affect the International system. As a reference of that old type of threat is "the events of the

year 1997, the devaluation crisis in Asia affected the entire Asian community, creating negative impacts on the whole region and beyond its borders."⁴⁰

Finally, besides the different threats, the economic factors are very compelling, "the Chinese estimates the potential oil reserves in the SCS as high as 213 billion barrels - 10 times the proven reserves of the U.S. But American scientists have estimated the amount of oil at 28 billion barrels."⁴¹ Then, regarding the different disputes and interest, and the imperative of keeping the SCS long term status quo, it is necessary to turn the ASEAN leadership into being more effective and influential. So while the U.S. has become a SCS stabilization factor, the sensitivity of China in that area compels the U.S. to implement a strategy of indirect approximation which most probably levers up the region into an stage of peaceful coexistence.

CONCLUSIONS

The South China Sea has been characterized by the convergence of several territorial disputes, where the PRC is the greatest antagonist. The fact is China has demonstrated a more aggressive attitude; it has strengthened its military capabilities and is determined resolutely to recover the said historical belongings. On the other hand appears Vietnam, which has experienced direct pressure from China, and it perceives the ASEAN, UNCLOS and the U.S as the opportunity to be assisted and multilaterally supported against China and its hegemonic interests.

In consequence, maintaining stability in the SCS requires the direct interplay among the ASEAN and the USA (PACOM is the stabilizing pivot). For the ASEAN, the challenge is to achieve a higher level of leadership in Southeast Asia; and for the United States, the priorities are maintaining and strengthening its global authority, increasing its cooperation projects and agreements in the SCS, and counteracting emerging and global threats. However, the USA should always take into account China's susceptibility and the possibility of future echeloning of disputes.

The Chinese economy is highly dependent on the SCS; accordingly, in the short term, PRC is not interested in generating factors of instability, as this would affect the economy and its growth. However, their historical actions have demonstrated that they will not give up on their reunification interests over Taiwan; and Beijing will not allow discussions concerning those spaces of sovereignty (Nine Dashed Lines). In the mid-term, some friction may appear as the interest in exploration or exploitation of resources may be a catalyst to the development of disputes. However, China's immediate actions are geared towards attaining greater regional power and achieving bilateral agreements in favorable terms.

For the international system, (the ASEAN, the UN, among others) the maintenance of the status quo in the SCS is extremely necessary; therefore, the political goal is aimed at reaching agreements for the intervention of the international legal instruments (the UNCLOS, ICJ) in order to achieve potential resolution of disputes; to Vietnam, an effective communication within ASEAN (supported by USA), can influence the association of nations, leading to reaching the spirit and guidance needed in the SCS.

Finally, the ASEAN and Vietnam cooperative strategies by themselves will not exert a decisive influence in the mutual interest protection and region stabilization. Furthermore, the interaction of the United States is required in that process, increasing the confidence level inside the ASEAN and the implementation of new mechanisms, reforms and improvement of regional integration processes.

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