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The Repercussions of Chinese Military Power and Capabilities' Development on Regional Conflicts: The South China Sea as an Example

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Abstract

The South China Sea has gained significant importance in regional perception, particularly by China, which views this vital region as an exclusive zone of influence based on historical claims of ownership of the sea's waters. According to its perception, its presence and expansion of influence contribute to the promotion of its interests and the achievement of its goals. This has led to the development of its military capabilities and their deployment in large parts of the sea, resulting in wide-ranging disputes and conflicts with neighboring countries that have rejected these claims. Furthermore, tensions have increased as a result of China's orientations, notably in the unprecedented development of its military capabilities and the deployment of its forces in multiple parts of the sea, all of which have had a clear impact on the conflict in the South China Sea.

Keywords: China, conflict, military capabilities South China Sea, United States.

Introduction

The South China Sea has become significantly important, particularly to the regional countries with coastlines along its shores, most notably China. China regards the South China Sea as a strategic waterway through which one-third of international trade flows, in addition to being rich in natural resources. Its presence in this maritime area serves to advance its interests and goals. Additionally, it lays claim to extensive portions of the sea, particularly the islands situated at its center, asserting them as part of its sovereign territory. Since 2009, China has presented a map featuring nine dashed lines to the United Nations, eliciting responses from neighboring countries that have refuted China's assertions. This has sparked a series of disputes between those countries and China. Furthermore, tensions have escalated due to regional countries' apprehensions about China's actions, particularly its unprecedented military capability development and deployment of forces across various parts of the sea. All of these factors have significantly impacted the conflict in the South China Sea and its future, particularly in light of China's expanding military prowess.

Research Significance

The importance of the research arises from the geographic significance of the South China Sea, which holds substantial advantages that have positioned it as a focal point for regional powers, particularly China. China has declared its entitlement to lay claim to extensive sea areas, citing them as part of its sovereign territory. Consequently, it has focused on enhancing

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its military capabilities to accomplish its key goals in this maritime region and establish itself as a dominant force in the area.

Research Questions

The problem of the study is based on the main question: "Will the growing power and military capabilities of China affect the nature of the conflict in the South China Sea?" Along with some implicit questions:

1. What is the significance of the sea South China Sea in the Chinese perception?
2. What are the military power and capabilities of China?
3. What is the future of the conflict in the South China Sea in light of the growing military capabilities of China?

Research Hypothesis

In line with the study's problem, the study hypothesizes that "The advancement of China's power and military capabilities has been a major driving force for China to establish itself as a regional power in order to pursue its interests and objectives. Simultaneously, this development has influenced the nature of the conflict in the South China Sea. Consequently, the research will be structured as follows:

The Strategic Significance of the South China Sea in the Chinese Perspective

Based on the China's current position as the world's second-largest economic power, as well as its overall strength and its location in Southeast Asia as the region's largest country (Hamid & Salman, 2019). With an extensive coastal area of approximately 18,000 square kilometers along the South China Sea, which serves as a vital maritime route for global trade (Qandeel, 2020), China also acknowledges the sea's natural resources. From this standpoint, China regards the strategic importance of this waterway as an area historically under its influence. Former Chinese President Deng Xiaoping asserted in 1975 that the South China Sea has been part of China since ancient times. As a result, China's claims to the rightful ownership of the South China Sea waters have significantly expanded. China has presented a series of official documents to the United Nations to substantiate its claims, which encompass natural areas in Southeast Asian countries. One of these official documents is a "map," according to China, that demonstrates its historical ownership of the entire South China Sea. The map features a U-shaped line with nine dashes, extending along the coast of Vietnam and the continental coasts of Malaysia and Brunei, before returning alongside the Philippines to Taiwan (Miller, 2019). However, these assertions align with China's acknowledgment of the significance of the South China Sea. The strategic importance of this area can be outlined as follows:

1. The South China Sea is home to substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, with estimated oil reserves of seven billion barrels and estimated natural gas reserves of nine hundred trillion cubic feet. Chinese assessments indicate that the exploitation of these resources in the South China Sea would result in substantial yields of oil and natural gas. As a result, the South China Sea holds more oil than any other location within the "Asia-Pacific" region. Consequently, from the Chinese perspective, this region will fulfill a significant portion of China's energy requirements, particularly given its urgent need for a new energy source. China currently accounts for over 10% of global oil production and more than 20% of the world's total energy consumption. Therefore, the South China Sea is strategically positioned to serve as a primary hub for China's energy needs, offering substantial cost advantages in transportation

- and ensuring the fulfillment of all of China's energy resource requirements (Kaplan, 2015).
2. China's geographical position and extensive coastal presence along the South China Sea have motivated it to exert influence over the sea's islands. Despite the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Treves, 2008), stipulating a 200-nautical-mile territorial sea, contiguous zone, and exclusive economic zone for seas in general China has rejected these international maritime law concepts and instead adheres to historical claims of rightful ownership of the South China Sea. Consequently, this underscores the South China Sea's importance in the Chinese perspective, as the exclusive economic zones of other coastal countries intersect with regional claims for parts of the sea's islands, particularly the Spratly and Paracel Islands. From China's viewpoint, these regional claims by countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia are seen as violations of Chinese sovereignty, conflicting with its historical claims of ownership over the South China Sea waters (Dagboush & Al-Rashidi, 2022; Gomez–Marin & Sheldrake, 2023).
 3. China recognizes the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea as one of the vital passages for one-third of global trade and the significance of its disputed islands. Given that 82% of China's imported oil passes through this sea after traversing the strategic Strait of Malacca, China is concerned about the potential use of U.S. naval fleets deployed in the Pacific and Indian Oceans to block the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which would harm Chinese interests there (Mohammed, 2019). Consequently, China acknowledges the importance of this matter and views the South China Sea and its islands with great interest, as they represent crucial locations for deploying military bases and various facilities for surveillance and information gathering. This became evident when China began constructing over three thousand acres of artificial islands in the South China Sea since 2014, in addition to building seven new islands in 2015 near the Spratly Islands, which are strategically important to China due to their considerable distance from the Chinese mainland (Miller, 2019).

Nevertheless, it is clear that China aims to bolster its maritime and aerial capabilities through these actions, with the goal of expanding its influence in the South China Sea. Furthermore, China seeks to achieve its regional aspirations by becoming the predominant geopolitical force and the primary authority over maritime routes. This strategic objective would allow China to establish the South China Sea as a vital domain and a crucial entry point into the realm of major global powers (Mohammed, 2019).

The Development of China's Military Power and Capabilities

From the perspective that a state's strength and effectiveness lie in the capabilities it possesses, when looking at China's globally superior economic power, his superiority has given rise to a great ambition to employ its economic potential in developing its capabilities in other areas, especially the military. This is in order to address any threats or challenges facing its ascending trajectory in the international system, as well as to secure its position as a major power in its regional spheres of influence. Therefore, military power is one of the main tools for achieving the state's highest goals, and this is what China has focused on, given the effectiveness of its role and the influence it has gained in the international environment, especially since the beginning of the current century.

The Chinese military strategy is a contentious topic among researchers and specialists in Chinese affairs due to the imprecision of the publicly announced figures regarding military spending and the advancement of its military capabilities. This stems from China's recognition of the risk associated with disclosing any indicators related to its military

capabilities, which could raise concerns for other countries, particularly those in the region. This could potentially impede the progress of China's military development or serve as a primary reason for regional countries to welcome the presence of the United States. Moreover, China believes that revealing the accurate numbers would raise concerns for major countries and create challenges stemming from future Chinese military power, prompting a reassessment of the global balance of power (Al-Badeeri, 2015).

In line with that, China has focused on the principle of secrecy in developing its military capabilities based on its military doctrine, which also emphasizes continuous reforms in this field. This is aimed at enhancing the Chinese military structure through the possession of advanced weapons, with the goal of withstanding global military developments. The primary motivation behind this is to narrow the significant gap between China and the United States, which is the leading global power in this field. This would enable China to be capable of militarily confronting any direct threat to its interests (Al-Qamash, 2020). In fact, since 2010, China has been engaged in a rapid military modernization program encompassing the army, weapons, and other military equipment. This is further bolstered by China's significant increase in military spending (Al-Muaini, 2018). Therefore, we will outline the extent of China's military expenditure, as well as the size of its armed forces and its traditional and non-traditional military capabilities as follows:

1. **The Chinese Military Expenditure:** Due to China's ambitious desire to showcase its global influence as a major player in the international arena, coupled with its second-place global economic standing, China has been driven to pursue advanced military capabilities. This pursuit is intended to safeguard its international position and interests. Additionally, China aims to fortify its military arsenal to create a deterrent force capable of addressing potential threats and challenges that may hinder its rapid rise. The substantial increase in China's defense budgets is clear evidence of the enhancement and regional deployment of its military capabilities.

After examining the figures for Chinese military expenditure, it becomes evident that since the 1990s, particularly in response to the changes in the international system, China started to acknowledge the new reality, which presented a series of challenges that required the enhancement and advancement of its military capabilities. Starting from 1997, military spending has been increasing, reaching \$15.70 billion, compared to the 1996 budget of \$14.28 billion. In 2000, there was a more substantial increase to \$22 billion (Dandan, 2015). In 2007, China announced a 17.5% rise in its military expenditures, reaching around \$45 billion (Hamid & Salman, 2019). Despite this, China persisted in advancing the enhancement and technological development of its military forces. In 2008, military spending saw a notable increase compared to 2007, reaching \$84.9 billion, positioning China as the world's second-largest military spender after the United States. In 2009, there was a further increase to \$100 billion (Younis, 2016).

The data clearly show that China is deeply committed to developing its military system, which is closely linked to its military doctrine. This commitment is focused on enhancing its military arsenal, achieving regional military strategic balance, addressing threats, and elevating its military standing in the international arena. However, China's military spending has been rapidly increasing, particularly since 2010. This is partly attributed to the shift of U.S. interests to the Asia-Pacific region and the emergence of conflicts in the South China Sea involving the countries bordering the sea (Allison, 2018). According to the Stockholm International

Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Chinese military spending saw a significant surge in 2011, reaching approximately \$143 billion (SIPRI, 2015). The trend continued in subsequent years, reaching about \$228 billion in 2017 and approximately \$232.53 billion in 2018 (Jaarboek, 2018). Despite this, Chinese military expenditure has continued to rise steadily, reaching approximately \$240.33 billion in 2019 and around \$257.97 billion in 2020 according to SIPRI statistics (SIPRI, 2021).

In light of this, it must be noted that the increase in China's military spending is also linked to the size of the military expenditures for weapon manufacturing technology related to China's growing military production capacity. Especially after transforming from an importer of weapons to a supplier. According to the SIPRI, China ranked fourth among the world's largest arms exporters in 2019-2020, after the United States, Russia, and France. Eight of its arms manufacturing companies are now listed among the top 100 arms sales companies. In 2021, its total sales reached approximately \$109 billion. Pakistan was the largest recipient of Chinese arms, accounting for 38% of China's total exports, due to its unstable situation in the face of growing terrorist groups, as well as the ongoing conflict with India (Buchholz, 2022).

In 2021, military spending witnessed a significant increase, reaching \$293.35 billion. Despite China's announcement of a military spending budget for 2021 of approximately \$229 billion, it is evident that China spent additional amounts to update new and advanced weapons technology without declaring them. This includes hypersonic missiles and nuclear-powered vehicles, aimed at ensuring the possession of sophisticated deterrence weapons in case of engagement in any traditional war, being fully prepared (Al-Qamash, 2020).

In those figures, it is noticeable that China shows no indication of reducing its military spending. In 2022, it reached approximately \$230.55 billion (Buchholz, 2022), and in 2023, it reached approximately \$224.79 billion. This is due to China's recognition of the new challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, especially after the Biden administration's release of its strategy in February 2022 for the Indo-Pacific region. This strategy emphasized strengthening the United States' relationships with its regional partners, including expanding U.S. diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Additionally, these developments may reflect a new scenario regarding the conflict in the South China Sea (Walters, 2023). Therefore, China continues to increase its military spending as a strategic hedge to secure advanced military forces capable of confronting potential threats in the region.

Size of the Armed Forces and Military Capabilities: Due to the high levels of military spending in China, which have significantly contributed to the development of the Chinese military forces and their offensive and defensive capabilities, China possesses the largest army in the world (actual military personnel in service), numbering around 2,000,000 as of 2023 (Global Fire Power, 2023). Despite the large size of the Chinese army, this does not negate the principle of qualitative rather than quantitative focus. China has utilized its financial resources to equip a strong army through training with the latest methods, as it represents the primary defense front for China in countering any potential threats, in addition to equipping it with the latest advanced weapons (Abdul-Hay, 2014).

China's military capabilities are often analyzed in the context of its economic strength, which has attracted the attention of global powers. This has motivated China to strive for advanced military capabilities in order to establish itself as a dominant global military force. These ambitions have prompted close scrutiny of China's military development efforts (Power, 2019). Since the early 2000s, China has been intensifying its focus on enhancing its military

capabilities through sustained and increasing military expenditures. This has raised concerns among international powers, particularly the United States, that China, having achieved economic dominance, is now aiming to excel in the military sphere. A 2019 report by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency highlighted China's strategic goal of amassing weapons and expanding its national power, driving continuous advancements in its military capabilities (Power, 2019).

In light of this, China possesses various types of advanced military equipment and technology, including medium-range ballistic missiles capable of targeting both land and sea-based targets, advanced combat submarines, as well as advanced armament systems and technologies in the field of air defense, due to its possession of modern fighter aircraft, advanced aircraft carriers with self-sufficiency capabilities, advanced missile systems for targeting satellites, and anti-ballistic missile systems (Hamid & Salman, 2019).

According to the latest statistics from the global website Global Fire Power (2023) which specializes in military affairs, the military power rankings for the year 2023, based on several factors including military capabilities, military spending, and geography, show that China has ranked third globally, after the United States in first place and the Russian Federation in second place. Additionally, these statistics indicate the size of China's military power and capabilities across its three branches (land, sea, and air), Table 1.

Table 1. Chinese Military Strength and Capabilities and Global Ranking Until 2023.

Ranked globally	Number	Type	Category
Fourth	4950	Combat tanks	Ground Force
Second	174,300	Combat vehicles (armored)	
Fourth	2795	Self-propelled vehicles	
Twelfth	1434	Field artillery	
Second	3145	Rocket artillery	
Second	50	Naval destroyers	Naval Power
The first	43	Naval frigates	
Second	72	Warships (corvettes)	
First	78	Military submarines	
Fourth	150	Patrol ships	
Second	36	Anti-mine ships	
Second	2	Aircraft carriers	
Third	3	Helicopter carriers	
Third	913	Helicopters	
Third	3011	Military aircraft	
Second	1600	Interceptor combat aircraft	

In addition, China possesses non-conventional “nuclear” military capabilities, and although it is considered one of the five major nuclear countries, and the only one in Asia, its nuclear strategy has been characterized by ambiguity, as this strategy has contributed to China's transformation from a small and undeveloped nuclear power into a power. More advanced nuclear weapons due to continuous modernization, have become increasingly reliable nuclear capabilities as a means of deterrence (Mills, 2022).

Due to China's modernization of its nuclear capabilities, it now possesses an offensive and defensive nuclear arsenal, represented by modern types of nuclear submarines equipped with ballistic missiles, long-range radars and satellites that detect any nuclear attack, and sonar networks on the seabed to serve anti-ship ballistic missiles, in addition to possessing 3 large ships called "Sea Crocodile" due to their enormous military capabilities as they contain launching pads for advanced ballistic missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. According to the 2022 statistics of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, it is estimated that China has a nuclear stockpile of about 410 nuclear warheads, linked to air, sea and land launch platforms (China's Nuclear Inventory, 2022).

- a) China owns 4 ballistic missile-carrying, nuclear-powered (SSBN) submarines, in addition to 2 of the same type under construction. These submarines can carry up to 12 JL-2 ballistic missiles with a range 7200 km.
- b) China currently has approximately 240 ground-based missiles with large nuclear capabilities, of different types and ranges, namely: a ballistic launcher (DF-26) with a range of up to 2,200 km, an intercontinental ballistic missile launcher (DF-31A) with a range of up to 11,200 km, and a ballistic launcher (DF-5A) with a range of up to 13,000 km, as well as short-range missiles (DF-3A) with a range of 3,000 km, and (DF-21) with a range of 2,100 km.
- c) China has about 20 H-6/B-6 aircraft, and a group of air platforms for delivering nuclear weapons, as well as 5 CJ-20 cruise missiles with a range of 1,500 km that are launched from the air.

Despite these conventional and non-conventional military capabilities that China possesses, at the same time it has sought to possess weapons characterized by very enormous capabilities, namely the very high speed in reaching its targets, as well as the superior ability to maneuver so that it is difficult to discover them except in the last moments before hitting the target. They are called "Hypersonic Weapons," according to a study announced by the US Department of Defense in 2020, which revealed that China possesses hypersonic weapon systems. As for the types of these weapons that China has worked on developing, it is a PL missile. -15) It has a hypersonic speed and a range of 400 km, and a hypersonic anti-ship ballistic missile of the model (CM-401) with a range of 450 km and is launched from fixed ground bases or from aboard ships, and a ballistic missile of the model (Dongfeng-17) equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle at a speed of 7,680 miles per hour while carrying nuclear warheads (Al-Qamash, 2020). China is also currently working on developing a hypersonic glide vehicle (DF-ZF), capable of flying at a speed of 12,000 kilometers per hour and being nuclear armed (Bitzinger, 2021).

China's Main Objectives in the South China Sea

In light of China's superior military capabilities, as part of its strategic orientations, it has worked to employ these capabilities, especially in the ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea, with the aim of controlling a large percentage of the sea, which it views as a region of great geostrategic importance. Therefore, the main goals of China's possession of capabilities are advanced and technologically superior military, due to its strategic ambitions to emerge as a regionally superior military force, capable of confronting any challenges or threats that may be exposed to it regionally, especially in light of the ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea. Therefore, China's military goals in the sea lie in:

1. The South China Sea is a buffer zone to the south of mainland China, so China's control over it will allow it to create a military barrier through which it can challenge any military

- threat in the future. An example of this is: If China controls this region, no blockade can be achieved before. Any country or coalition of countries against China.
2. China's control over the lands of the vital region, especially the South China Sea, will allow it to establish and develop military bases through which it can confront any regional competitors, especially those who dispute with China in the sea, and external ones such as the United States of America.
 3. The large Chinese military presence in the South China Sea and its advanced military capabilities will contribute to preventing potential adversaries from accessing the region, and will discourage any future military activity targeting China. This trend confirms the principle of deterrence, which is the main military goal in the Chinese strategy in the South China Sea (Rubiolo, 2020).

China recognizes the significance of its strategic goals in the South China Sea, which can only be attained through a robust military and superior capabilities to address regional and international challenges. This includes the modernization and expansion of its military capabilities in the region, transitioning from a land-based force to a maritime force, and a substantial investment in developing deterrence capabilities, such as anti-ship missiles, radar technology, anti-submarine weapons, and anti-ship ballistic missiles (Raine, 2017). Furthermore, China has undertaken efforts to militarize the South China Sea, including the development and expansion of small islands and coral reefs in the disputed areas. These have been transformed into military bases and airstrips, with the potential for future military use. China has also established a well-organized naval fleet, incorporating paramilitary forces such as the Marine Police, the Maritime Safety Administration, and the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command. These forces are positioned at the forefront and are prepared to support Chinese naval military forces in the event of any direct military confrontation (Rubiolo, 2020).

Therefore, it can be said that China's success in possessing naval forces that are regionally superior to all other naval forces in the region has enabled it to achieve realistic deterrence towards the parties to the conflict in the South China Sea. Given those parties' awareness of the difficulty and impossibility of confronting China militarily, they have tended to conclude defense agreements. Especially with the United States of America, with the aim of strengthening its defense front against China.

The Future of Conflict in Light of China's Growing Military Superiority

China's emphasis on enhancing its military capabilities aligns with its military doctrine, which aims to develop the Chinese military structure by acquiring advanced weapons to keep pace with global military advancements and narrow the significant gap with the United States. This focus is also driven by the desire to enhance its ability to confront potential challenges and threats (Al-Qamash, 2020). As a result, China has devoted substantial resources to the development of its military arsenal, including modern and technologically advanced equipment and weapons across land, air, and sea domains, particularly since the early 2000s, with billions of dollars allocated to this endeavor. Notably, China's military spending has seen a gradual increase, rising to approximately \$134 billion in 2011 and reaching around \$230.55 billion in 2022, positioning China as the world's second-largest military spender after the United States (Buchholz, 2022).

China's focus on enhancing its military capabilities is in line with its ambition to become a

global military power, particularly following its emergence as a global economic power. This endeavor is aimed at creating a global military balance of power, which, from China's perspective, would provide additional strength in pursuing its goals and interests, especially within its vital regional sphere. The South China Sea, in particular, has been a focal point due to the various conflicts and tensions in the region. China's increased military spending, development of highly advanced military capabilities, and establishment of a superior naval force in the area are primarily intended to create a strategic barrier, enabling China to effectively confront potential threats in the region (Raine, 2017).

In light of this, China's efforts to establish a sophisticated naval force, particularly in the South China Sea, and to expand its military presence in this strategically important region, which is a potential flashpoint for conflict, indicate China's intention to solidify its position as a regional military power that is challenging to counter by any other regional or international power. This is underscored by the escalating defense budgets that have propelled China to an increasingly dominant military position. In this context, American officials have consistently cautioned about the erosion of the U.S. military advantage in the face of China's rapid military advancements, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. For instance, in 2021, U.S. Air Force General Cameron Holt highlighted that China had deployed advanced "hypersonic" weapons at a rate "five to six times" faster than the United States, with most of these installations located in the South China Sea (Heath, 2023).

Hence, due to the escalating American policies in Southeast Asia, particularly in providing military support to the conflicting parties and establishing a military presence in the Philippines and Vietnam, both of which are in conflict with China in the South China Sea, there is a potential for increased conflict in this region. It is plausible that China, with its technologically advanced weapons and naval power surpassing that of the parties involved in the regional conflict and even the U.S. naval capabilities in the area, could emerge as the stronger party in this conflict. Although the United States has ruled out "military confrontation," it is cognizant of China's intentions and is prepared to safeguard its vital regional interests if they are endangered. American observers have expressed concerns that China's rapid military modernization and its military expansion in the South China Sea may indicate preparations for a conflict with the United States. For instance, in March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, the head of the U.S. Command in the Indo-Pacific, cautioned that China has become a superior military force in the region and is capable of taking military action against any regional or international party (Heath, 2023).

Conclusion

China's intentions and actions in the South China Sea are increasingly evident, as it seeks to bolster its military capabilities to establish a dominant presence in the region and assert control. This pursuit of dominance is expected to heighten tensions in the South China Sea, particularly in response to perceived threats to Chinese interests, notably from the United States, which has a military presence in the region and supports parties in conflict with China. In this context, it is foreseeable that China, with its advanced weaponry and naval power, could emerge as the stronger party in the event of a conflict. While the United States has ruled out direct military confrontation, it remains prepared to safeguard its interests and goals in the region. American observers have expressed concerns that China's rapid military modernization and expansion in the South China Sea may indicate preparations for a potential conflict with the United States

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