

SOUTH CHINA SEA: THE CHINESE APPROACH

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Abstract

The international community has shown considerable interest in China's assertiveness in the South China Sea in recent times. The objective of this study is to examine the strengths and weaknesses that form the foundation of Chinese strategies, and decipher the underlying motives and strategies employed by China in its pursuits. The paper evaluates China's current position in the South China Sea and its effects on regional stability and global geopolitics. The findings reveal that China follows a holistic approach with significant infrastructure, diplomatic, and regional geopolitical gains. These efforts expose risks such as regional alliance tensions, international legal framework complexity and though rare but potential armed engagements.

Keywords: South China Sea, Territorial and Maritime Claims, Escalation of Tensions, Nine-Dash Line, Strategic Dominance, Maritime Militia, Gray Zone Strategy.

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is a region characterized by ongoing disputes and political tensions. In the SCS region, many countries, including China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia have overlapping territorial and maritime claims¹. The presence of these intersecting claims has significantly contributed to the escalation of tensions in the SCS region. The Nine-Dash Line², also referred to as Jiuduànxiàn, is considered significant in defining China's territorial claims³. The primary focus of the conflict is around Spratly and Paracel Islands and vast bodies of water. These disputes are influenced by a range of causes including nationalist sentiments, territorial sovereignty, maritime jurisdiction, resource allocation, and the management of commercial sea routes. The leadership of claimant states often uses the issue as a means to garner political and diplomatic support. The matter has incited fervent and sometimes antagonistic public sentiment in China, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

The maritime conflicts of China encompass both territorial disputes over islands and marine claims involving other claimants in the region. The matter concerning the maritime claims to territorial waters involves the participation of several states in the region. These states are China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam and Taiwan. The ongoing disagreement amongst these states is to the ownership and control of the chain of islands known as Spratly and Paracel, situated

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within the contested maritime region of the SCS⁴. The interests of all parties involved in the dispute over this body of water center around the desire to control fishing waters, exploit the abundant reserves of natural gas and crude oil beneath the ocean's surface and most importantly, to establish strategic dominance over shipping routes traversing the area.

This territorial issue has the potential to initiate a regional confrontation among the six claimant states, namely China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, and Vietnam. The nation states asserting ownership over the sea water hold divergent perspectives regarding territorial claims and their corresponding responsibilities. The engagement in international trade within this region has rendered this body of water a subject of apprehension for both the states asserting their claims and the others having stake in that region, especially the US⁵. The SCS is widely recognized as a strategic waterway connecting the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific region. Hence, within the context of power dynamics in the South China Sea, China and the U.S. have initiated reciprocal efforts to assert their influence and establish dominance over the prevailing international order. China, as the primary claimant, has exhibited a significant level of assertiveness in its pursuit of its position on maritime matters and territorial waters in the SCS.



The US places significant importance on the diplomatic and security challenge posed by the conflict in the SCS⁶. Furthermore, there are countries that maintain robust diplomatic relations with the United States, exemplified by Vietnam. China, a significant economic partner of the United States and a potential military competitor, is also implicated in the present matter⁷. The ongoing conflict around the (SCS) has led to a notable decline in diplomatic ties between China and Southeast

Asian nations that claim their sovereignty within the area. The development of this problem has caused diplomatic and strategic discord between the United States and China.

The SCS has emerged as a source of contention between the United States and China, leading to uneasy diplomatic ties. In the maritime and aerial domains of the SCS, the military forces of the U.S. and China have developed a level of familiarity with operating in close proximity to each other⁸. These circumstances are frequently marked by mutual mistrust between the parties. China aggressively seeks territorial sovereignty over a large area of the South China Sea. In contrast, the five Southeast Asian states have made limited territorial claims around the SCS, that covers 62–90% of the sea⁹. China claims various islands, rocks, reefs, and waterways 800 nm from Hainan, which Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia all claim¹⁰.

The Chinese policy in the region demonstrates a pragmatic approach and strategic opportunism¹¹. Following the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia"¹², the U.S. has made renewed efforts to manage the SCS dispute¹³. In response, China has implemented a range of strategies that could be characterized as "soft" forms of coercion as part of its SCS policy. Notable strategies include the following: -

- Establishment or enlargement of naval structures.
- Reorganization of China's military command hierarchy to prioritize territorial and maritime assertions.
- Heightened frequency of naval patrols and monitoring conducted by the maritime militias, which refer to China's non-factual naval forces.

This paper highlights the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese strategies in South China Sea.

In his article titled "The Rise of China: Implications for Security Flashpoints and Resource Politics in the South China Sea", David Rosenberg posited that China has adopted a strategy of "creeping assertiveness". He posits that the strategy is characterized by gradual and ambiguous threats, in the region¹⁴. The new development projects on Fiery Cross Reef by China are indicative of its regional assertiveness. The analogy is drawn from the fact that the island is being designed to accommodate strong naval presence with warships and aircraft carriers. According to Rosenberg, China is pursuing a strategy of "strategic pragmatism" in its efforts to address conflicts with neighbouring countries.

According to the book "War or Peace in the South China Sea" edited by Timo Kivimäki, the principal cause of the conflict is not the security. The valuable seafood and other treasured resources in the contested region are the real cause of the dispute¹⁵. The clash holds significant importance for the inhabitants of Southeast Asia, given that a large proportion of the populace resides in coastal regions. Consequently, this proximity has considerable economic and ecological implications for the affected population.

The publication titled "The Security Environment in Asia-Pacific" by Sanu Kainikara affirms that the issue is at the forefront of the global agenda. The strategic significance of regional security issues vis-à-vis changing international environment, sea-lane transportation, and global trade are behind this significance¹⁶. Consequently, the conflict has emerged as a global security concern, attracting the attention of external stakeholders such as the European Union, US, Japan, and others.

According to Ryan Martinson's article China has maintained a consistent stance regarding the East and South China Seas for several decades. However, there has been an increase in the intensity and coerciveness of Chinese policies and activities since 2008, partly attributed to the global financial crisis. At its core, the Chinese perspective maintains that the disputed regions within the maritime sphere unequivocally constitute extensions of their territorial sovereignty. This stance is purportedly bolstered by legal principles recognized on a global scale. Chinese authorities claim territorial privileges over three million square kilometers of oceanic area, or what is colloquially known as China's "blue national territory"¹⁷. In addition, Martinson elucidates that China employs its naval capabilities to safeguard and promote its stance in two primary categories including, territorial sovereignty and maritime entitlements. Safeguarding "blue national territory" has been primarily entrusted to the People's Liberation Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and, in more recent times, the Maritime Militias.

Michael J. Mazarr provides definition of "gray zone strategy" as an endeavour or a sequence of endeavours that surpasses the steady-state deterrence and assurance. By employing a gray zone strategy, an entity endeavours to remain distant from point of no return that could trigger an armed conflict. Thus, gray zone competition and coercion are a combination of tactics that strive to operate beneath the threshold of war. According to Michael Mazaar, gray zone strategies are utilized to attain political objectives through a calculated and integrated approach, with the aim of achieving specific and often ambitious goals¹⁸. However, these strategies primarily rely on non-military or non-kinetic tools.

The proposed study will adopt a qualitative research design that employs a descriptive and analytical approach to evaluate the efficacy of China's assertive strategies in the South China Sea.

Historical Background

Since Chinese claims to historical rights over the area in the South China Sea (SCS), there have been tensions in the region. These tensions resulted in the expulsion of fishing boats from surrounding waters and naval conflicts with Southeast Asian states. Additionally, non-claimant states like the US and Australia also got into tense relations with China¹⁹, an environment indicative of China's assertive stance in the region.

During the period spanning over 2013 to 2015, China employed dredging methodologies to amass sand onto seven shallow submerged topographical features situated in the Spratly Islands. In a short time of two years, the activity resulted in the establishment of more than 3,200 acres of territory²⁰. The Chinese represent a land formation that is nearly 17 times larger than the combined land formations of all other states making claims, during the preceding four decades. China possesses the capacity to deploy a growing number of missiles, fighter aircraft, and strategic bombers on its newly established artificial islands, which may potentially serve as an array of invulnerable aircraft carriers²¹.

Simultaneously, the other petitioners claim that China has not been able to provide a valid rationale for its territorial and maritime assertions that aligns with the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Also, China has rejected the July 12, 2016, ruling against it by the Arbitral Tribunal held at the Permanent Court of Arbitration under the UNCLOS's jurisdiction²². China has a history of using military power to advance its South China Sea (SCS) territorial and maritime ambitions. China and Vietnam met two naval confrontations in 1974 and 1988, resulting in China's acquisition of disputed maritime features in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

China has taken control of Mischief Reef in 1994 and Scarborough Shoal in 2012, both of which are situated within 135 nm of the Philippine territory. Additionally, there has been a rise in the employment of coercive measures against rival claimant states. Such as damaging of vessels through ramming and the expulsion of fishermen from disputed waters since 2008. Additionally, in recent years there have been such incidents involving naval vessels of the U.S. and China²³. China's deployment of an oil platform about 120 nm off the Vietnamese coast in 2014, as well as interception of the Philippine fishermen attempting to enter Scarborough Shoal, have all contributed to lingering tensions despite the recent improvement in diplomatic relations between Manila and Beijing²⁴.

China's Gray Zone Activities

The term "gray zone strategies" refers to scenarios wherein state or non-state entities engage in competitive interactions that fall below the threshold of a declared state of war. The coercive measures employed within a "gray zone" exhibit a range of tactics that do not exceed critical levels of hostility, which would otherwise elicit a conventional military reaction. The aforementioned scenarios exhibit characteristics that include aggression, subjectivity, and uncertainty, as well as components such as reevaluation, incrementalism, and nonconformity²⁵.

The South China Sea (SCS) operational space has received increased attention, with China utilizing various campaigns under its "gray zone" strategies. These include the following: -

- Graduated pressure strategy and "Cabbage strategy"²⁶.

- Charm offensive²⁷.
- Three-warfare strategy²⁸.
- Mapfare²⁹.

The Philippine operational space has presented various manifestations and methods of "gray zone" strategies. These include but are not limited to military intimidation, border manipulation, information operations, paramilitary activities, cyberwarfare, economic coercion, and political influence³⁰. These strategies have been observed to operate within the "gray zone" and have been characterized by their ambiguous nature and lack of clear attribution.

As part of its maritime policy, China has been conducting a wide variety of operations in the SCS alongside the Yellow and East China Seas, in recent years. China employed various strategies to establish its military presence in the region with focus to incrementally solidify China's military foothold in the region. These strategies include³¹:-

- Sponsoring fishing fleets that engage in aggressive behaviour towards other fishermen and even the Coast Guards of other nations.
- Conducting extensive patrols with the China Coast Guard to intimidate non-Chinese fishers.
- Engaging to construct artificial islands with PLA military installations.

The actions undertaken by China are indicative of a discernible pattern of employing "gray zone" tactics. These actions are intended to execute meaningful and forceful maneuver without escalating into a full-scale conflict with any of the regional country and inciting significant global responses. The concept of "gray zone" is subject to ongoing debate in international circles. However, it is generally agreed that such challenges possess the following characteristics:-

- The phenomenon referred to as the "gray zone" occupies a space that lies between periods of peace and war.
- The activities that occur within this gray zone are typically characterized by aggressive intentions and often serve a larger strategic purpose.
- Ambiguity is a crucial component of gray zone actions.
- These actions employ a variety of power sources, including but not limited to political, economic, and military means.

China employs gray zone activities with the intention of deterring, dissuading, or mitigating its rival's competitive advantages. Simultaneously exerting pressure on Taiwan, the United States, and other entities to conform to its interests. Significantly, the country aims to exhibit its military readiness and sufficient will to resolve the territorial conflicts, including but not limited to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea, and the reunification of Taiwan³².

China has employed a diverse range of means, encompassing military maneuvers, missile exercises, economic pressure, and cyber operations to achieve its objectives. Over the last ten years, China has engaged in a range of gray zone activities aimed at neighbouring nations and territories embroiled in the South China Sea conflict. Taiwan is unequivocally situated at the forefront of China's gray zone operations.

It is noteworthy that Japan, similar to the United States, has acknowledged the existence of "gray zone situations" since 2013. These situations pertain to potential conflicts that may arise as a result of territorial sovereignty and interests in the region. The notion of gray zone scenarios is expressly expounded upon Japan's National Security Strategy of 2013 and the Defense of Japan 2014. In the Defense of Japan 2022 report, Japan has conveyed its serious apprehension regarding the ongoing gray zone scenarios and the associated risks emanating from China³³. China's foreign policy has become more assertive due to the growth of its economy and modernization of the PLA. The international community, particularly countries with territorial disputes with China, perceive China's gray zone activities as threats and dangers.

China's Maritime Militia

China has never disputed the existence of the militia, which is one of three branches of the country's armed forces. According to Article 2 of the Law of the China on National Defence, "the armed forces of the People's Republic of China [PRC] consist of the Chinese People's Liberation Army [PLA], the Chinese People's Armed Police Force, and the militia." Local government and associated departmental papers are more likely to refer to the marine militia than official documents from China's central government³⁴.

The existence of China's maritime militia is widely acknowledged, although there has been an overestimation of its numerical strength, functional responsibilities, and overall impact. There exist two distinct groups of actors who bear responsibility for this phenomenon. The first group consists of certain Chinese local governments and media outlets who seek to emphasize their achievements. The second group comprises certain US scholars who possess a proclivity for overstating the "China Threat". These scholars have extensively cited literature produced by the first group, which is not considered authoritative, without having conducted the requisite field studies³⁵.

Prior to the 1990s, the maritime militia of China had been instrumental in various military and non-military operations, owing to three key factors. Initially, the naval forces and agencies responsible for enforcing maritime law were comparatively feeble in comparison to the majority of adjacent nations. Therefore, it can be argued that China's maritime security agencies are reliant on civilian forces, specifically fishing vessels and dhows, to effectively carry out their crucial responsibilities in the SCS³⁶.

The Chinese maritime militia assumed noteworthy functions in reconnaissance and logistics throughout the 1974 military operation between China and Vietnam. Broadly speaking, the Chinese maritime militia functioned as a mechanism for protecting the coastal areas from possible hostile invasions. Furthermore, China's historical practice of People's War has resulted in a blurring of the distinction between conventional military forces and civilian population. The military doctrine originating from China's history has strengthened the tradition of valuing the people's support³⁷. This support has been highly regarded by Chinese leadership, particularly Mao Zedong, as it played a crucial role in the People's Liberation Army's triumph over the Kuomintang regime.

Presently, there has been a fundamental shift in all of these circumstances. Given the considerable strength of the Chinese navy and coastguard, the utilization of maritime militia appears to be of limited necessity. The Chinese navy has made significant strides in terms of quality and is approaching parity with the United States Navy (USN)³⁸. Its fleet in the western Pacific is presently greater than that of any other military, including the United States Navy. Therefore, it can be argued that the significance and sway of the maritime militia ought to diminish. The emphasis on professionalism in China's military has increased due to the modernization of its military, police, and civilian sectors. Moreover, the implementation of market economy principles has resulted in a decline in the attractiveness of the fishing industry among younger generations in China³⁹. This has ultimately led to a decrease in the number of fishing fleets operated by China in the South China Sea.

Chinese military statements display signs of undergoing transformation. According to the document titled "China's National Defense in the New Era (2019)," China is actively involved in reducing the number of primary militias throughout the country. Furthermore, the country is in a process of implementing reforms for its militia and reserve forces. These reforms primarily concentrate on evaluating and modifying their organization and makeup⁴⁰. The process of professionalization is considered crucial for a nation to achieve maturity as a significant global player.

It is anticipated that China's maritime militia will continue to exist in the future. The existence of China's militia can be interpreted as a reflection of the country's defense traditions and a particular period in its military history. Moreover, one could interpret it as a tangible representation of the concept of a "people's army." Historical experiences do not provide a complete basis for predicting contemporary and future realities⁴¹. However, it should be noted that China's historical dependence on its militia is not an isolated phenomenon, as even the United States of America's attainment of independence was facilitated by its militia.

Chinese Hybrid Warfare

The emergence of a novel form of warfare is intricately linked to the economic, political, and technological changes associated with the phenomenon of

globalization. This process is all-encompassing, profound, and fundamental, giving rise to a range of supra-national, transnational, and non-national entities⁴². The 2019 publication "China's National Defense in the New Era" by the Chinese People's Liberation Army refers to the fundamental principles of hybrid warfare, however, it does not provide a detailed explanation of these concepts.

The nature of warfare is undergoing a transformation towards information warfare, with the potential for intelligent warfare to emerge soon⁴³. The notion of "intelligent warfare" bears resemblance to "hybrid warfare"; however, it distinguishes itself by emphasizing the utilization of intelligent weaponry and equipment, along with their corresponding operational techniques, supported by the intelligence and information systems, with a particular focus on cognitive terrain.

After World War II, the US adopted a geopolitical approach to preserve its dominant position. The proposed approach entails the creation of a strategic differentiation in the Asia Pacific region, which would be maintained by a coalition led by the United States and Japan⁴⁴. The objective of this boundary is to impede China or any anti-hegemonic alliance from achieving worldwide dominance, as such an outcome would lead to the United States forfeiting its status of global preeminence. Currently, the threshold has been surpassed and there exists an ongoing occurrence of strategic overlap. The phenomenon is evident both in economic realms and within a variety of multilateral institutions and initiatives that characterize the emerging multipolar global landscape, with Beijing occupying a prominent role.

Washington views the protection of the two belts of defence installations and positions that surround China as a critical component in the area from a political and strategic perspective. Taiwan holds a significant position as a focal point of the initial chain. It serves as a crucial strategic location for the U.S. in its efforts to create a strategic parallel against Chinese influence in the region. The development of defence infrastructure through the construction of man-made islands constitutes a strategic maneuver towards the SCS. This is accompanied by a significant enhancement of missile capabilities, including hypersonic technology, as well as naval power⁴⁵. The SCS is presently a topic of contention regarding territorial claims among multiple Asian nations. China, along with Vietnam, and Taiwan have all staked claims to the Paracel Islands.

The South China Sea is a massive region of the Pacific Ocean, spanning over 1.3 million square miles from the Taiwan Strait to the Strait of Malacca in the south⁴⁶. These straits and Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) hold significant strategic value. Strait of Malacca being the most prominent due to its location housing Singapore and an American naval base. Additionally, the Philippines hosts an American Navy base that holds strategic importance in the region. In June 2020, Taiwan's Defence Ministry confirmed that China is establishing an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS, purportedly as part of its strategy to enhance its military presence in the Asia Pacific region⁴⁷. According to Chinese media reports, in

April 2020, the Chinese government announced creation of two more districts within the city of Sansha, situated in the southern island of Hainan⁴⁸.

China's Military and Maritime Strengths

The Chinese naval fleet is notably the most extensive in East Asia, and at some point, between 2015 and 2020, it exceeded the U.S. Navy in terms of the number of battle force vessels (which are the types of ships that contribute to the officially reported size of the US Navy)⁴⁹. According to the US Defence Department, the naval forces of China are the most extensive in the world, comprising around 340 platforms. These include significant surface combatants, submarines, ocean-going amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, aircraft carriers, and fleet auxiliaries⁵⁰. These numbers do not include an estimated 85 patrol combat vessels and watercraft equipped with Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCM). It is anticipated that the collective naval strength of China will increase to 400 vessels by 2025 and 440 vessels by 2030.

The modernization endeavour of China's naval forces incorporates a diverse range of programs aimed at acquiring ships, aircrafts, weapons, and C4ISR capabilities. Additionally, the initiative involves enhancement in logistics, personnel quality, Anti Access Area Denial force (A2AD), education, training, and exercises. The Chinese navy is presently facing certain limitations and vulnerabilities, which it is striving to address. There has been speculation among observers regarding the potential deployment of a fleet of four to six, or even more than six aircraft carriers by China in the future⁵¹. Towards the end of November 2019, the Chinese government opted to develop fourth carrier, while temporarily suspending plans for the construction of a fifth carrier. The fifth carrier, referred as Type-004, is intended to be powered by nuclear energy. This decision was attributed to financial and technical factors. It is anticipated by analysts that China will require a considerable time to achieve proficiency in operating carrier-based aircraft like J-15 on a significant level.

The J-15, the Flying Shark, is China's principal fighter aircraft designed for carrier-based operations. It is a derivative of the Russian Su-33 Flanker aircraft and is capable of operating from carriers equipped with ski ramps, as opposed to catapults⁵². This upgraded version is said to have the potential for increased range and payload capabilities⁵³.

Economic and Trade Strengths

China has been proactively endeavouring to enhance its association with Southeast Asia by employing collaborative measures such as formulation of trade pacts with the ASEAN members. Between 1993 and 2001, there was a significant surge in China's trade with ASEAN, with an annual growth rate of up to 75 percent⁵⁴. The financial crisis of 1997/98 served as a catalyst for China's pursuit of a stable regional environment that would facilitate sustained economic growth. The provision of aid by China to its neighbouring countries during the financial crisis resulted in a positive

shift in the regional perception of China's underlying intentions. In 2010, this region had a population of 1.9 billion individuals, a collective GDP of 6.6 trillion USD, and a total trade value of 4.3 trillion USD⁵⁵.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in 2020 and came into effect in 2022 adopts a more mercantilist trade approach for the Asian region. The Partnership would require minimal commitment from these nations in implementing genuine market-oriented reforms or adhering to environmental and labour regulations, in contrast to the regulations established by the World Trade Organization. However, it provides them with increased accessibility to China. This action could potentially promote China's regional interests; however, it may not significantly contribute to the establishment of an open and regional order.

During March of 2015, President Xi Jinping issued a statement advocating establishment of a regional order that would provide greater benefits to both Asia and the global community⁵⁶. China is poised to assume a crucial role and assumes increased obligations in promoting regional and global peace and prosperity. In regard to the Pacific region, China appears to be constructing an independent system. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) is perceived as an initial step in the overall process⁵⁷. The act of engaging in commerce with all Southeast Asian nations, coupled with the RCEP, represents a significant advancement towards strengthening the interdependence of ASEAN nations and China⁵⁸.

Strengths and Weaknesses of China

China's strategic strengths include the following⁵⁹:-

- A strong national cohesion which exhibits the role of a robust, multifaceted, and expanding economy, accompanied by a significant, adequately educated, and enterprising populace.
- A sturdy centralized governance structure ensures efficient management of the state.
- An effective leadership entails a well-defined strategic vision for the nation and a collective sense of destiny that is widely embraced by its populace.
- The People's Liberation Army is a large and increasingly sophisticated military organization that is not meant to mimic the United States and its allies' armed forces but rather to discourage and, if necessary, conquer them by exploiting their weaknesses.

The strategic positioning of Beijing enables it to assume a prominent position in East, West, and Central Asia. This enables China to potentially exert influence across a huge portion of the Eurasian continent⁶⁰. Numerous Chinese entities, including government agencies, businesses, academic institutions, and media organizations, possess extensive expertise in political warfare and are actively involved in China's international campaigns. A considerable proportion, albeit not universally,

of individuals of Chinese ethnicity residing in foreign nations experience a sense of loyalty towards Beijing.

Nonetheless, the strategic advantages are counterbalanced by a multitude of shortcomings on the part of China. Some of these shortcomings include the following:-

- An aging population and a negative population growth has resulted in low labour availability in certain areas⁶¹.
- China is faced with a significant gender imbalance, which poses a considerable challenge⁶².
- The loss of international competitiveness in China's manufacturing sector can be attributed to the escalation of labour and other expenses. One of the primary obstacles is shifting the primary emphasis of the economy from exported manufactured goods to the domestic consumption and services sector which poses a significant challenge.
- Endemic corruption across various sectors of China's economy has resulted in significant levels of resentment within certain segments of its society.
- The income distribution in China is characterized by significant levels of inequality, as evidenced by the fact that the top 1% of the population possesses approximately one-third of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 25% of the population owns only 1% of the country's wealth⁶³.
- The presence of unfulfilled social welfare requirements has been identified as a contributing factor to the dissatisfaction observed in certain regions.
- Environmental deterioration and delayed remediation are major concerns.
- Armed forces with limited exposure to actual warfare may cause irregularities in the operational capabilities of PLA.
- China's systems exhibit less integration and flexibility compared to those of the Western countries.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape in the South China Sea is characterized by complex dynamics, involving conflicting territorial assertions and sophisticated diplomatic complexities. China has strategically enhanced its position in the region through implementation of diplomatic strategies, utilization of its regional influence, and substantial development in infrastructure.

Chinese strategic approach has shown significant assertiveness and success in several areas. This includes gaining control over specific territories and effectively managing important commercial sea routes. The adoption of these strategies by China shows its ambitions for global influence and power. Once confronted by US interests, confrontation poses a greater risk due to its potential to escalate. Additionally, it is

important to analyse the strategic posture of China in the South China Sea as it has the potential to negatively impact diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries and further escalate ongoing conflicts (especially once interests of regional nation states are aligned with that of the US). Indeed, the uncertainty introduced by the United States' presence as a major external player in the area has heightened the current level of antagonizing interests. In addition, it is worth considering that the international legal system may face various forms of pressures as a result of these circumstances.

To solve these issues, it is important to rely on dialogue and diplomacy. As it may represent a viable approach to address the strained relationships between China and neighbouring countries in the SCS. It is recommended that China may enhance its communication channels with neighbouring countries and pursue peaceful resolution of territorial conflicts. One potential strategy is to establish collaborative committees aimed at negotiating and resolving conflicts, while also pledging to adhere to established international legal frameworks and standards.

Moreover, it is also vital to invest in the regional development projects. Promoting economic cooperation could be a viable approach to address the shortcomings associated with China's assertive policies in the South China Sea. China has the potential to enhance its relations with neighbouring countries through collaborative efforts aimed at improving infrastructure, increasing trade, and facilitating resource sharing. Such initiatives could foster mutual economic growth and prosperity. Nevertheless, the United States should work to de-escalate tensions in the South China Sea through diplomatic engagements, notably with ASEAN members.

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- ²⁷ The term "charm offensive" has been frequently employed to characterize China's diplomatic approach, initiated in the early 2000s. This strategy encompasses the utilization of diplomatic, economic, cultural, and public diplomacy endeavors to cultivate and enhance relationships with other nations, with a particular focus on those geographically proximate and within the developing world.
- ²⁸ The "Three Warfares" strategy employed by China pertains to a strategic approach that seeks to exert influence on the strategic landscape using non-military methods. The formalization of this concept is considered to have taken

- place inside the realm of Chinese strategy during the early 2000s. The concept of the "Three Warfares" encompasses three distinct forms of warfare, namely Psychological Warfare, Media Warfare, and Legal Warfare.
- ²⁹ The phrase "mapfare" appears to be a linguistic blend of the words "map" and "warfare," implying a strategic approach that incorporates maps or geographic data as a means in conflict, potentially encompassing symbolic, legal, or informational dimensions. Within the specific framework of China, this phenomenon may pertain to the utilization of cartographic representations as a means to assert territorial assertions or to mold perceptions of China's territorial sovereignty.
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