

Competing Maritime Interests in the South China Sea: Asian Geopolitical Implications

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea, as a strategic route for international trade and a rich natural resource area, is at the center of tensions between countries in the region. This research will analyze the root causes of conflict, the strategies used by regional and global actors to advance their interests, and the geopolitical implications for stability and security in Asia. This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The research results show that global maritime power competition in the South China Sea has a significant impact on Asian geopolitics. Regional tensions, economic uncertainty, changes in global security dynamics, environmental damage, diplomatic and international legal challenges, strategic uncertainty, impacts on energy security, as well as increased military activity and weapons are direct consequences of this competition. This underscores the need for collaborative efforts, multilateral dialogue and sustainable policies to manage and mitigate negative impacts, while promoting stability in the South China Sea region.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea region have reached their peak again, creating a heated situation between competing coastal countries. This competition is not only focused on territorial control, but also includes competition for areas rich in natural resources (Fajrina et al, 2020). One element complicating this dynamic is China's claim to the Nine-Dash Line, which controversially covers most of the South China Sea. China's official map covering these claims, as noted by Vujakovic (2020), became a major trigger for conflict and increased the level of tension in the region.

The geopolitical impact of these claims is particularly felt in the ASEAN region, where member countries feel a direct impact on regional stability. Along with the claims made by China, ASEAN must face major challenges in maintaining security and coordination among its members (Chalid et al, 2016). As highlighted by Fathun (2017), tensions in the South China Sea have escalated, complicating ASEAN's efforts to reach a solid consensus in response to conflicting claims. Additionally, United States intervention, especially in its support of countries such as Japan involved in the conflict, has added a new dimension to geopolitical tensions in the region.

The claims submitted by China to the South China Sea are not only the basis for fighting for territorial sovereignty, but also a strategic instrument in developing the country's income and economy (Tandi et al, 2021). As stated by Maksum (2017), this claim was implemented as part of China's efforts to access and manage the abundant natural resources in the South China Sea. Apart from resource potential, this area also has significant underwater heritage value, known as

Underwater Cultural Heritage. China has ambitious plans to utilize this underwater heritage in order to build the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," an infrastructure project promoted by China to increase maritime connectivity and trade in the region, (Blanchard, 2017). Thus, China's claims to the South China Sea not only create geopolitical tensions, but also represent an integrated strategy to optimize the region's economic and cultural potential.

However, China's claims have triggered complex and protracted disputes in the context of sovereignty and territory. Perez-Alvaro & Forrest (2018) highlight the complex and historically rich geopolitical nature of the South China Sea which plays a central role in complicating conflict dynamics. This dispute can be divided into two main dimensions, namely territorial sovereignty and maritime sovereignty, as explained by Junef (2018). These two aspects are at the heart of issues that have marked debates and tensions that have lasted for decades, reflecting the complexity of geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea. Therefore, a deep understanding of these dynamics is essential to overcome problems related to territorial claims and their impact on regional stability.

The South China Sea's importance as a vital international trade route and vast reserves of natural resources make it a center of geopolitical tensions. The fight for control of this zone involves strategic, economic, and security interests, creating complex dynamics between competing countries (Ramli & Lumumba, 2021). Therefore, this research aims to dig deeper into the root causes of competing maritime interests, analyze the strategies implemented by regional and global actors, and identify their impact on stability and security in the Asian region.

In this context, a deep understanding of conflict dynamics and the factors that influence it becomes a necessity. This research will discuss foreign policy, strategic changes, and geopolitical considerations that shape the power game in the South China Sea. Through a policy analysis approach, interest mapping, and case studies of related maritime conflicts, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to detailing and understanding the complexity of competing maritime interests in the South China Sea, as well as its geopolitical implications for the Asian region.

Literature Review

The definition of political geography is the science that studies the relationship between political life and activity and the natural conditions of a country or in other words studies the states and its natural environment. Apart from that, political geography also studies countries as a political region which includes both internal geographical factors and external factors, namely relations between countries. The object and geography of politics is the analysis and relationships between countries and adaptation to environmental conditions within those countries. Thus, political geography can be interpreted as "Is the geography of states and provides a geographical interpretation of international relations" (Ruslin, 2013). Geopolitics is a tool for countries to control and compete in their territorial areas. Geopolitics is also part of human geography, which is not only about geographical conditions because human geography in question is the condition of the world as a whole in various aspects. These conditions will later be used to create policies that are not only political policies, but also policies in various aspects, for example economics and others (Colin Flint, 2006).

Geopolitics is divided into three main paradigms: classical geopolitics, modern geopolitics, and postmodern geopolitics. Classical geopolitics, based on the thought of Mackinder and Haushofer, emphasized the importance of controlling the seas as the key to dominating world trade and, ultimately, world domination. In this perspective, the sea is considered a rich natural resource, and a country's success is closely related to its naval strength. Classical geopolitics closely links physical geography with state domination, especially through maritime expansion (Flint, 2006).

In contrast, modern geopolitics shows a paradigm shift towards geoeconomics, with a primary focus on the dominance of the economic sector rather than the military. This thinking comes from neoliberals and critics, who emphasize that each country competes to build its economic power through international cooperation. Modern geopolitics highlights that the traditional concepts of classical geopolitics are becoming less relevant in the modern multipolar world and emphasize the importance of economic cooperation between countries (Flint, 2006).

Meanwhile, postmodern geopolitics offers a more complex view of world developments. This paradigm emphasizes that the world has evolved beyond the modern era, and dramatic changes have occurred in forms of space and control. With the technological revolution and globalization, states have experienced a weakening of their role, which has led to an identity crisis. Brickell (2012) notes that the geopolitics of postmodernism details increasingly subtle territorial shifts resulting from technological progress, with an increasing emphasis on economic and environmental aspects.

METHOD

The research method used is a qualitative descriptive method. According to Moleong (2000), the aim of descriptive research is research that is described in the form of descriptive words and not numbers so that what is collected becomes the key to what is researched. Bogdan & Taylor in Moleong (2014), define qualitative methods as research procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. The use of descriptive research with a qualitative approach is seen as more supportive and meaningful in absorbing problems related to the research focus (Yulianah, 2022). Then the data collection method was carried out by interviews and documentation. The data analysis model in this research is an interactive model. In interactive analysis, the collected data is read, studied and analyzed, then an abstraction is made. After being abstracted, the data is then arranged in units while checking the validity of the data. The final step is data interpretation,

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Significant changes in the constellation of interests in the South China Sea are currently creating increasingly complex geopolitical dynamics. Over the last few decades, the interplay of interests in this region is no longer limited to the six main claimant countries. On the other hand, a number of powerful countries that were previously not directly involved are now entering the competitive arena, showing the magnitude of the impact of China's increasingly dominant presence in the South China Sea. China, as a new superpower in the global order, plays a key role in permeating interests in the region. Apart from the main claimant countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Taiwan, non-claimant countries such as the United States, South Korea, Japan, Australia, England, Germany and India are increasingly involved in the vortex of interests in the SCS. This phenomenon shows that the South China Sea has become the focus of global attention, and countries with economic, security and geopolitical interests are involved in efforts to manage the complex dynamics in the region (Zhao, 2018).

China's growing dominance in the South China Sea has also led to reactions from various parties, including efforts by the United States, South Korea, Japan, Australia and European countries, to maintain stability and balance of interests in the region. In fact, India and Indonesia, although not the main claimants, are also involved in the vortex of interests, marking the complexity and importance of the SCS in international relations. With so many countries involved, this shift shows that the SCS is no longer just an arena for regional competition, but also reflects global tensions involving the main actors in today's geopolitical world (Sudira, 2014).

China's actions in claiming most of the South China Sea (SCS) have created concerns at regional and international levels. China, claiming around 80-90 percent of the SCS area which is equivalent to 3.5 million square kilometers, has taken drastic steps to strengthen its claims. This effort involved the creation of two new districts and giving names to 80 geographic features in the SCS, demonstrating a systematic effort to strengthen its presence and territorial claims. In addition, China is aggressively building infrastructure in the SCS, including military bases, ports, naval docks and missile systems. Increased routine military exercises, increasing numbers of military personnel, coast guard officers and maritime militias further complicate security dynamics in the region (Nainggolan, 2016).

The importance of China's military infrastructure in the SCS is evident through the latest satellite imagery showing the construction of a massive military base on Mischief Reef. Infrastructure development includes installations for radars, antennas and military bases, underscoring China's intensification of efforts to secure its dominance in the SCS. These steps have not only deepened tensions in the region but also raised international concerns regarding regional stability and maritime security. Deep understanding and appropriate responses are needed to overcome the impact of China's territorial claims and militarism in the South China Sea.

Top of Form

Details reported by The National Interest (TNI) show that China has carried out significant military expansion in the South China Sea (SCS) region. This step includes the construction of military bases on several strategic islands such as Subi, Mischief, Fiery Cross, and on Woody Island in the Paracel archipelago. The infrastructure built includes missile installations, advanced radar, and the ability to station helicopters in several locations. The importance of larger military bases, such as those at Subi, Mischief, Fiery Cross, and Woody Island, is apparent in the development of infrastructure supporting the maintenance of military aircraft, including fighter aircraft and large patrol ships.

This increase gives China the ability to expand its military presence in the SCS in the future. Infrastructure equipped with military aircraft maintenance facilities shows that China is not only building bases to support daily operations, but also has the capacity to carry out greater power projection in the region. Thus, this action creates further tensions in the SCS and fuels concerns regarding China's dominance in the military and geopolitical spheres in the region. In this context, international efforts to understand and respond to changing security dynamics in the South China Sea have become increasingly urgent.

The dynamics of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea have broad and complex impacts, including several significant aspects:

Regional Tensions

Regional tensions arising from the dynamics of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea have serious implications for regional stability. Overlapping territorial claims and rivalries for control of natural resources in the region have created deep uncertainty among countries in the South China Sea region. These developments pose a threat to regional peace, increase the risk of armed conflict, and create a tense geopolitical atmosphere. This instability can spread to economic and security aspects, affecting surrounding countries and even creating wider global impacts. Therefore, to overcome these impacts, it is important to encourage regional dialogue, diplomacy and cooperation to create a more stable environment in the South China Sea.

Economic Uncertainty

The impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea also includes economic uncertainty that could harm economic stability in the region. The threat of conflict and disputed territorial claims can hinder trade, reduce foreign investment, and create uncertainty that

harms the economic growth of the countries involved. The sustainability of natural resources in the South China Sea, which is at the center of competition, can also have a direct impact on the economic sector, especially the fishing and oil industries. In a global context, economic instability in the South China Sea could trigger negative impacts on regional and global supply chains. Therefore, managing economic competition in the South China Sea is crucial to minimizing risks to economic growth and overall regional stability. Collaborative efforts and a dialogue-based approach are key to overcoming the economic uncertainty that can arise from maritime competition in the region.

Changing Global Security Dynamics

Changes in global security dynamics are a significant impact of maritime power competition in the South China Sea. By involving large countries such as China, the United States and other global actors, competition in the SCS has shifted the global balance of power. Increased military activity, the formation of new alliances, and increased tensions between countries have created a scenario of strategic uncertainty that could affect global stability. In addition, this competition also forces countries outside the region to adjust their foreign policies in response to changing global security dynamics. Increasing tensions between great powers could create potential threats to world peace and encourage an arms race that could increase the risk of military conflict to the detriment of all parties. Therefore, multilateral coordination and cooperation are becoming increasingly important to prevent conflict escalation and promote global security stability amidst increasingly complex competition.

Effects on the Environment

Maritime power competition in the South China Sea also has a significant impact on the environment in the region. Increased military construction activities, such as the construction of bases and installations, as well as excessive use of natural resources, have posed serious threats to marine ecosystems and biodiversity along the SCS. The construction of military infrastructure such as military bases, ports and naval docks can damage vulnerable marine habitats, including coral reefs and important aquatic ecosystems. In addition, the use of military technology and increased maritime activity can increase the risk of oil spills, marine pollution and other environmental damage. These negative impacts are not only limited to the local environment, but also have long-term consequences for global ecological sustainability. Therefore, marine environmental protection and natural resource management policies in the South China Sea are essential to prevent further damage to the environment and ensure the sustainability of marine ecosystems that are important for life in the region.

Diplomatic Challenges and International Law

The fifth impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea involves diplomatic and international legal challenges that arise along with territorial disputes and competing interests in the region. Intense and overlapping territorial claim disputes between littoral states have created legal uncertainty and challenged diplomatic boundaries. Efforts to resolve through diplomatic channels and international institutions often prove complicated, and the presence of strong national interests often hinders the dialogue and negotiation process. These diplomatic challenges can create a dynamic of continued uncertainty, hinder cooperation between countries, and even trigger an escalation of conflict. In this case, the importance of prioritizing legal and diplomatic approaches to resolve territorial disputes in the South China Sea is becoming increasingly important in order to achieve a peaceful solution that is sustainable and in accordance with international legal norms .

Increased Strategic Uncertainty

The sixth impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea is increased strategic uncertainty that can affect energy security at regional and global levels. The South China Sea is a vital route for global energy trade, especially oil and gas shipments. Rivalry and tensions in the region could create risks to the security of energy supplies, given that strategic maritime routes could be disrupted by conflict and military action. This disruption to energy transportation can trigger price increases and uncertainty in energy supply on the global market. Countries that rely heavily on energy imports from the region are particularly vulnerable to this impact. Therefore, competition in the South China Sea is not only a regional issue but also has a significant global impact, especially in the context of security and sustainability of world energy supplies. Collaborative efforts and well-planned energy policies are essential to address these risks and ensure the stability of global energy security.

Impact on Energy Security

The seventh impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea is increased military activity and weapons in the region. As competition intensifies, the countries involved are likely to increase their military presence, strengthen defense capabilities, and invest resources in weapons development. Increased military activity includes large-scale military exercises, construction of military bases, and deployment of more advanced weapons systems. This creates an arms spiral that could increase the risk of conflict and military escalation in the region. This increase in tensions could trigger a regional arms race and complicate security dynamics, posing a serious threat to regional stability. Therefore, arms control and sustainable security policies are key to reducing the risk of armed conflict and creating a more stable environment in the South China Sea. Joint efforts and open dialogue between countries are important to overcome the negative impacts of this increase in military activity.

Increased Military Activities and Arms

The eighth impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea is the influence on the foreign policies of the countries involved in managing competition and responding to territorial claims. Countries in the region, both those directly involved and those only as observers, tend to adjust their foreign policies in response to shifting dynamics in the SCS. Changing balances of power, territorial disputes, and military actions are pushing countries to reconsider their alliances, strategic partners, and diplomatic relationships. Additionally, countries outside the region are also involved in determining their approach to this competition, which may include increasing cooperation with certain countries or taking a neutral position to prevent confrontation. Shifting geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea are creating complexity in the web of international relations, and countries around the world must consider the impact of this competition on their foreign policies to maintain global stability and security .

CONCLUSION

The eighth impact of global maritime power competition in the South China Sea is the influence on the geopolitics of the countries involved in managing competition and responding to territorial claims. Countries in the region, both those directly involved and those only as observers, tend to adjust their foreign policies in response to shifting dynamics in the SCS. Changing balances of power, territorial disputes, and military actions are pushing countries to reconsider their alliances, strategic partners, and diplomatic relationships. Additionally, countries outside the region are also involved in determining their approach to this competition, which may include increasing cooperation with certain countries or taking a neutral position to prevent confrontation. Shifting geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea are creating complexity in the web of

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