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# COVID-19 Crisis and Escalating Tension Between the US and China in the South China Sea

Whilst countries around the globe have been distracted with the COVID – 19 crisis and trying to curb the spread of the virus as well as recovering the economy, Beijing has not stopped its activities in the South China Sea (SCS). After originating in Wuhan, Hubei province of China in late December 2019, the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has spread to at least 188 countries, with the US being among the worst hit.

The long-standing issue between China and other four claimant countries in South East Asia: Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei over territorial disputes in the SCS has not been paused due to the pandemic. The sea is significant and contentious as it connects North-East Asia and the Western Pacific Ocean, offers the shortest routes between the two and contains major sea lanes of communication.

Additionally, approximately \$3.37 trillion in total trade passes through the SCS every year.

China claims almost the entirety of the disputed islands, known as the “nine-dash line” and stated that it has a historical basis on the claims. The then 11-dash line appeared on the map of the South China Sea Islands in 1947, later the Communist Party of China removed the two dashes to give the Gulf Tonkin to Communist Vietnam in 1949.

adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.” The claim had sparked a protest from Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, they stated that the claims made by China have no basis under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos).

China has been involved in Maritime Territorial disputes with four other Countries, however, the issue mainly involving China with other two disputants,

Nine – dash line map:



Source: Center for Strategic And International Studies, Permanent Court Of Arbitration

In 2009, China submitted a diplomatic note to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf with the attachment of nine-dash line map and claimed that it has "indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the

the Philippines and Vietnam. Territorial disputes involving China in the SCS are as follows: A dispute over the Paracel islands, which is claimed by Vietnam and China and occupied by China, a dispute over Scarborough Shoals, which is claimed by

China, the Philippines and Taiwan and controlled by China since 2012, also a dispute in Spratly islands which is claimed entirely by China, Taiwan and Vietnam, and partially claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. The islands are occupied by these countries, except for Brunei.

In 2013, the Philippines brought the case to The Hague, since it has overlapping claims with Beijing. In July 2016, The Hague favours the Philippines and stated that China isn't entitled to an EEZ, which extends up to 200nm from any outcrop in the Spratly islands, it also said that Beijing had violated the Philippines' sovereignty in building artificial islands. In response, China's Foreign Ministry said that China doesn't recognize it, and further called the ruling as 'void'. Despite the ruling, Beijing's efforts to build the man-made islands around the disputed islands in the SCS.

Freedom of Navigation (FON) Operation was prompted by Washington's concern over the proliferation of excessive maritime claims and its impact on national security and international trade, also to send a clear message that all nations are obliged to obey the International Law of the Sea as codified in UNCLOS, as well as asserts its rights to traverse the waters aligned with international law.

Beijing insists that it supports the FON operations as what President Xi Jinping once stated, "There has been no problem with the maritime navigation or overland flights, nor there will ever be in the future." However, the two giants seem to have a different view over FON operations, as explained by a senior

diplomat from China as to what Beijing sees as the underlying issue:

*"The difference between China and the United States is not a difference between freedom of navigation. We are very clear that we support freedom of navigation in accordance with international law, not only in the South China Sea but also in other parts of the world. The difference is that we think the United States takes freedom of navigation as an excuse, what their ships and planes have been doing is actually close surveillance of China's coastlines and islands and reefs."*

Different views over FON operations conducted by the US, as well as its criticism over artificial islands built by China on disputed islands, are the main factors contributing to the barbs being traded by the two giants in the SCS. Beijing's man-made islands in the South China Sea have also been a source of concern for other claimant countries and drew attention from the US. As tension grows between the U.S. and China, last year one of China's senior naval officers stated that China may seek to further build up its man-made islands in the South China Sea if it feels the outposts are under threat.

The relations between the two were already heated before the outbreak of coronavirus. Beijing seems to adopt the more assertive approach as reflected in the SCS, while President Trump's administration stated that great power competition was the defining feature of the age and the contest with China was at the heart of U.S. global strategy, as written in the 2017 National Security Strategy.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the rivalry between the U.S. and China. President Trump's administration has criticized China for their lack of transparency, claimed that China did not fully share information sooner regarding the outbreak, and argued that the U.S. could have acted sooner.

In early April, Bloomberg News reported that the outbreak began in Hubei Province in late 2019, China has publicly reported only around 82,000 cases and 3,300 deaths according to data compiled by John Hopkins University. These numbers can be compared to the over 189,000 cases and more than 4,000 deaths in the U.S., which is reported to have the largest outbreak in the world. The numbers reported by China are approximately half of the cases reported in the U.S.

China is reported to have lifted its lockdown in early April after imposing a strict lockdown at the end of January to stem the spread of the virus, while some media reports mentioned that the U.S. is among those countries that were hit the hardest by coronavirus by late March 2020. With 330 million people, a densely populated nation like the U.S. provides a vast pool of people who can potentially get infected by COVID-19.

At a time when countries around the globe are distracted with the pandemic, China has caused concern recently by establishing new administrative districts for the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos and naming 80 islands and other geographical features in the sea, claiming sovereignty over underwater features along the way. The move from China may

be interpreted as taking advantage of the crisis.

The US views China's expansive claims over sovereignty in most of the SCS as unlawful. However, recently Washington seems to toughened its stance by declaring opposition to a swath of Chinese claims in the South China Sea, in an unusually direct challenge to Beijing's efforts to assert control in the strategic waters. The US Secretary of State, Mr Pompeo also stated, "The world will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire,".

Now that Washington officially rejected the claims made by China, the shift may escalate the tension between the two and affect their relations elsewhere.

Previously, Washington maintained that it doesn't take a position on which nation has sovereignty over each feature in the Spratlys and that the operation was not intended to challenge any country's claims of sovereignty over land features. Recent development has shown that Washington's stance has shifted.

Ever since the outbreak of coronavirus, the rivalry between the two giants have sharpened, this tension prevents them from cooperating in combating the virus. While the new stance on the SCS has shown that the US stands by its South-East Asian allies, the recent event may have implications in US-China relations elsewhere. This may also affect the security of the region in general.

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