

MONITOR

SECURITY

Geopolitics in the South China Sea

Military Rearmament and Consequences for Europe

Jan Senkyr, David Merkle

- › China is concerned with strategic depth to protect its critical infrastructure in coastal areas and with power projection.
- › In addition to militarizing and administratively incorporating individual islands, China has planned to build and deploy floating nuclear power plants to power them.
- › The other littoral states have not remained idle in the face of Chinese expansion in the SCM either.
- › The European Union and Germany are directly affected by developments in the South China Sea.
- › Germany and Europe could influence the Chinese leadership's cost-benefit calculation and deter them from military escalation in the region.
- › In response to Chinese militarization, the United States is consolidating new regional security alliances and military cooperation with allies in the region.

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Background

Besides the Taiwan issue, the South China Sea is currently the geopolitical hotspot in the Indo-Pacific. China's ultimate claim to nearly 90 percent of the sea area is causing territorial disputes with Southeast Asian littoral states and fuelling tensions with power rival the United States in the region. Over the past decade, the People's Republic (PR) of China has filled in numerous artificial islands in the South China Sea and developed them into military bases. And it continues the process of land reclamation. China's increasingly repressive approach to other states' ships and aircraft in the disputed areas increases the risk of accidents and could quickly lead to a military confrontation.

The U.S., on the other hand, demands respect for the international law of the sea and adherence to the principles of the rules-based order. These include open and secure sea lanes and trade routes. For China, it is a matter of strategic depth to protect its critical coastal infrastructure and power projection in the Pacific. The South China Sea is also closely related to the Taiwan issue: If China were to attack Taiwan, the entire maritime area in the Southwest Pacific would become a theatre of war.

Strategic Importance

The South China Sea (hereafter: SCM) has a high strategic importance. About one third of the world's crude oil exports are transported by sea through the SCM, and the most important sea routes for goods and raw material transports from Europe and Africa to Asia pass through this area. It has rich fish stocks and large oil and gas deposits are suspected. The reefs and atolls in the SCM are claimed not only by China but also by the neighbouring states of Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan, and their respective exclusive economic zones overlap partially or completely.

South China Sea with the Nine-Dash Line reflecting the PRC's claims.



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China's Claims in the South China Sea

It is not least geostrategic considerations that are leading to an escalation of tensions in the SCM. Already under the predecessor of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, Jiang Zemin, the "historic goal" of making China a "maritime superpower" was formulated in 2000.¹ Since 2006, Beijing has tried to expand its control over large parts of the disputed waters with the help of police ships. Beijing withdrew from the dispute settlement procedures of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and began mining disputed offshore gas fields. At the same time, Beijing unilaterally undertook energy explorations in the waters and launched campaigns against rival claimants when they sought the same.²

Like other states, China seeks to interpret international law and thus also the applicable conventions on the law of the sea in such a way that it serves its own interests as coherently as possible.

On the one hand, the People's Republic, as a coastal state, frequently refers to interpretations aimed at rejecting and, if possible, restricting freedom of navigation activities of foreign navies; on the other hand, its own sovereignty claims are interpreted to the maximum and counter-positions are rejected in all severity.³ In 1996, the PRC acceded to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and has since consolidated its claim over almost 90 percent of the SCM. The PRC's claims extend far into the coastal areas of the littoral states and include ownership of all reefs, sandbanks, and natural resources in this area.⁴ Without clearly defining the exact claim, Beijing then specifically reaffirmed the territorial allocation according to the nine-dash-line in 2009, which it justifies not least with historic rights.⁵

Historical Background

Beijing frequently links its own claims in the SCM with the concept of "maritime sovereignty." However, the legal significance of the nine-dash-line remains unclear and can be interpreted as a "maximum territorial claim," as a "boundary marking," or as the delimitation of "historical waters."⁶

China refers to documents that prove the presence of Chinese envoys, but also fishermen and traders on the islands already in times before Christ. The central arguments of the Chinese side for their own ownership claims are fed by the first naming of islands and atolls as well as the documented incorporation of various areas into the jurisdiction of the empire at that time.⁷

In 1947, the government of the Republic of China, then still from the capital Nanjing, published a map with eleven short dashes (the so-called Eleven-Dash Line), which asserted the claims of the Kuomintang-led Republic of China (which was at that time in civil war with the Chinese Communists) in the SCM. The area within the drawn line largely corresponded to that of imperial Japan, over which Japan had expanded by the end of World War II. After Mao's Communists expelled the Kuomintang to Taiwan, they adjusted the map of the previous government on behalf of the newly formed PRC, replacing the eleven-dash line with one consisting of nine dashes (nine-dash line).⁸

On January 22, 2013, the Philippines initiated arbitration proceedings against the People's Republic of China under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.⁹ The process ended in 2016 with the award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rejecting China's claims based on the Nine-Dash Line. However, Beijing does not recognize the Court of Arbitration's final decision, just as China had already refused to recognize the process as such.

China's expansion in SCM

Since 2012, China has begun to build artificial islands on individual rocks, reefs, and atolls in the South China Sea and to construct infrastructure on them. This has triggered concerns among the littoral states, which claim these areas for themselves and have been using them economically for decades in some cases. The U.S., the dominant military power in the Pacific, followed the construction work with equal attention, but initially did nothing about the Chinese land reclamation process.

It was not until China began installing extensive military facilities on the three largest islands that alarm bells went off in Washington. The U.S. increased its military presence in the region, conducting strategic patrols and combined and multinational manoeuvres in the SCM. Since 2015,

U.S. Navy ships have regularly patrolled near the artificial islands as part of the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) program to make clear to China that its territorial claims in the SCM are not accepted by the United States.¹⁰

The development of construction work on China's artificial islands is closely monitored and documented with the help of satellites and reconnaissance flights by various states. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), founded by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is concerned with analysis and information on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. The Island Tracker website regularly posts satellite imagery with information on construction activities on islands in the SCM.¹¹

The disputed areas are primarily the Paracel Islands (claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan) in the northwest and the Spratly group of islands in the southeastern part of the SCM (claimed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and the Philippines). China maintains approximately 20 outposts in the Paracel archipelago, and of the Spratly reefs, it has seized, filled, and militarized seven islands. Since 2012, China has also taken control of the Scarborough Shoal atoll off the Philippine coast but has not (yet) built any structures here. The appropriation of the atoll was the trigger for the Philippines to initiate arbitration proceedings against the PRC at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in 2013, as described above.

Claims of the riparian states

Name	Claiming Parties	Characteristics
Spratly Islands	PR China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia	Over 100 widely scattered reefs, atolls and small islands
Paracel Islands	PR China, Vietnam, Taiwan	130 small coral islands and reefs
Pratas Islands (Dongsha)	PR China, Taiwan	Group of islands, consisting of on atoll
Macclesfield Bank	PR China, Philippines, Taiwan	Sunken atoll consisting of reefs and sandbanks
Scarborough Reef	PR China, Philippines, Taiwan	Several small islands (rocky landscapes) on the reef

Summary according to list in Messmer; Chuang¹²

While China's development of artificial islands in the Spratly Island group has generated much media and political attention, similar land reclamation projects in the Paracels further north have received little public attention. However, the island chain, under Chinese control since the 1970s, plays a key role in China's efforts to build capacity for surveillance and power projection in the SCM.

In total, China has established 20 outposts on reefs and atolls in the **Paracel Group**. Most of the posts have small harbours, helipads, and technical facilities such as communications and surveillance equipment. The largest island, Woody Island, is China's main military base in the Paracels and the administrative centre for all Chinese-claimed territory in the SCM. Woody Island has a protected harbour, a 2700-m runway, and an air base with hangars for fighter aircraft and likely platforms for surface-to-air missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles.¹³ In July 2012, China's State Council declared Sansha City, located on Woody Island, a prefecture-level city belonging to Hainan Province. Its jurisdiction includes the approximately 280 islands, shoals, reefs, and surrounding sea areas, which together total nearly 800,000 square miles of sea and land area.¹⁴ Since 2012, the arrangement of local government has been steadily expanding. For example, additional districts have been assigned to the city; at the local level, there are at least four working and management committees and ten neighbourhood committees.¹⁵

In the **Spratly Archipelago**, China has filled seven reefs and atolls with sand and fortified them with concrete, creating new land with a total area of 1,300 hectares (13 km²). The three largest islands – Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef – have been equipped with airports and runways (3000 m) where large military aircraft such as strategic bombers can land. The airports each have twenty hangars for fighter jets and four larger hangars that can accommodate bombers, tankers, and transport aircraft. All three islands have large port facilities with berthing facilities for very large ships, including submarines. There are also modern sensor and communications facilities, radar domes, and antennas. On two islands (Fiery Cross and Cuarteron Reef), high-frequency radars have been installed for long-range monitoring of ship movements. In addition, large underground structures have been constructed on the three islands, presumably for water storage and fuel and munitions storage.¹⁶

The remaining four smaller artificial islands also have infrastructure that can be classified as both dual-use and purely military. In particular, the communications and radar facilities, as well as other sensors, are suitable for enabling the monitoring of maritime and air traffic throughout the region.

Some experts believe that in addition to the military installations on the artificial islands, China has also built sensitive infrastructure underwater and on the seabed of the SCM. This infrastructure, consisting of various sensors such as sonobuoys, composite photoelectric cables, and communication and data transmission systems, could likely be used to monitor the entire underwater area of the SCM. This would e.g., enable the detection and location of submarines and other underwater objects in the region.

The waters of the SCM are believed to be the primary area for patrol by China's strategic submarines, which are an important part of the nuclear deterrent. The Chinese nuclear submarine fleet is based in Sanya on Hainan Island. China's newest and most powerful spaceport, Wenchang, is also located there and is also of high strategic relevance. Against this background, it is evident that Beijing's top priority is the SCM as a protection zone for its critical infrastructure in the southern coastal areas.

Floating nuclear power plants

To be able to supply the artificial islands and their military infrastructure with sufficient energy, China has planned the construction and deployment of floating nuclear power plants (NPPs). A related project to build an initial demonstration unit of a multipurpose modular offshore reactor with a capacity of 60 MW was announced by China General Nuclear Power Corporation (CGN) in 2016.¹⁷ In 2017, the construction of another reactor model with a capacity of 100 MW was announced in collaboration with China National Nuclear Corp (CNNC). In total, up to 20 floating nuclear power plants are expected to be built and deployed in SCM in the coming years, according to Chinese official circles.¹⁸

The deployment of such a fleet of NPPs would further increase political and security tensions in the region. With a quasi-inexhaustible mobile energy source, China's militarization and economic exploitation-especially in the areas of oil, gas, and natural resource extraction-of the SCM could be significantly intensified. This would inevitably lead to another level of conflict with the littoral states and the United States. In addition, there is the risk of accidents and incidents with serious environmental and geopolitical consequences for the entire region. However, in May 2023, Chinese media reported that the plan to deploy floating NPPs in the SCM would be suspended for the time being.¹⁹ Technical aspects and security concerns were listed as the reason for suspending the ambitious project. Accordingly, underwater attacks and acts of sabotage on the nuclear facilities could not be ruled out. However, observers suspect that concerns about a further escalation of conflict in the region may have played an important role in the Chinese authority's decision.

Activities of the SCM riparian states

The other littoral states have not been idle in the face of Chinese expansion in the SCM.

Vietnam claims most of the reefs and atolls in the SCM. Currently, Hanoi holds about 27 islands. Vietnam has conducted land expansion and construction work on eight islands, but on a much smaller scale compared to Chinese artificial islands. The newly added structures are mostly concrete bunkers, garrison buildings, protected harbours, helipads, and communication facilities. However, most of the formations Vietnam occupies are not islands, but coral reefs and sea sandbars, or small rocks. These structures are difficult to defend and supply. Notable infrastructure is located on Namyit Island, Pearson Reef, and Sand Cay, where harbours have been dredged for larger vessels. The most important island is Spratly Island, where there is a 550 m runway.²⁰

Malaysia filled Swallow Reef in the SCM with sand and paved it with a concrete runway back in the 1980s. There is a small naval base and a 1,368 m runway on the island. The island is also used for tourism, as a diving resort is located here. In addition, Malaysia occupies four other smaller islands located in the southern part of the SCM near the coast of the East Malaysian state of Sabah.²¹

Taiwan has only one island in the SCM, which it seized back in the 1950s. Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island) is the largest rocky island in the Spratly Group. The island contains mostly civilian structures, such as fishermen's shelters, an infirmary, a post office, weather stations, communications facilities, and a radar installation. There is also a 1,200-meter runway.²²

The Philippines owns nine islands in the Spratly Group. Notable infrastructure exists only on Thitu Island, where there is a 1,300-m runway. The runway has been repaired in recent years and some new buildings have been added for technical and administrative purposes, as well as a new boat ramp. Thitu Island is only 22 km from the Chinese artificial island of Subi Reef, so there are frequent clashes with the Chinese navy.²³

Indonesia is not directly affected by the territorial conflict with China in the SCM. The Indonesian Natuna archipelago is located on the southwestern edge of the SCM. The islands' territorial affiliation with Indonesia is not officially contested by China. However, the associated exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles (370 km) overlaps to a large extent with the territory claimed by China within the so-called "Nine-Dash Line. Several clashes between Indonesian navy and coast guard vessels and Chinese fishing vessels and patrol boats in the archipelago's waters have caused tensions between Jakarta and Beijing in recent years.²⁴

Brunei claims Louisa Reef in the south of the SCM, as well as the associated Exclusive Economic Zone, but has no military activity here.

U.S. military cooperation in SCM

To counter China's aggressive territorial posturing in the SCM, the United States is stepping up efforts to expand its security options in the Indo-Pacific region. New regional security alliances, as well as expanded military cooperation with allies in the region, are one option for doing so. In February 2023, it was announced that the U.S. would gain access to an additional four bases in the northern Philippines under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), in addition to the five military bases it already shares.²⁵ These new sites are strategically located near Taiwan and the southern coast of China, and their radius of influence includes areas around the Spratly Islands. While the United States is not allowed to maintain a permanent military presence in the Philippines, it can use the bases for urgent operational purposes.

Since the EDCA agreement contains a mutual assistance obligation, military cooperation between the U.S. and Philippines would be very likely in the event of a Taiwan conflict. If so, Philippine military bases would provide an important strategic advantage for the United States. Washington also maintains military relations with other SCM littoral states. Its closest partner in the region is Singapore. U.S. forces regularly conduct military exercises with Vietnam and Indonesia.

Options for action by the EU and Germany

The European Union and Germany are directly affected by developments in the South China Sea. As one of the most important trade and investment partners in the region, Europe is dependent on free and safe sea routes as well as a stable security situation in the SCM. Even a disruption or blockage of traffic through the Strait of Malacca would have serious consequences for the EU economy. A military conflict in the region would plunge the entire global economy into a severe crisis. Both the EU and Germany have therefore developed strategic guidelines for the Indo-Pacific.²⁶ These list the most important interests and principles for political action in the region. These include peace and security, multilateralism, rules-based order, and human rights, as well as free sea lanes, open markets and free trade, and climate and environmental protection.

However, the options for action in security policy are limited. Europe and Germany can contribute little or nothing militarily to security in the SCM. However, they can influence the Chinese leadership's cost-benefit calculation and thus deter it from military escalation in the region. As important trading partners of China, Germany and Europe can exert considerable pressure on the government in Beijing by threatening sanctions. They can also counter China's growing influence in the region by broadening and deepening relations with states in Southeast Asia, particularly in the areas of economics, innovation, and development. Military presences on the ground – such as with the planned deployment of German Navy ships in 2024²⁷ – have more symbolic significance. However, they can be understood as a sign of solidarity and cooperation from our partners in the region and are also actively demanded.

The national Indo-Pacific strategies presented in recent years by countries such as France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany provide the strategic basis for deeper engagement of European states in the region. They have also led to a clearer identification of Europe's strategic interests in the region and the inference of a direct link between European security and stability in the South China Sea. The European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy ties directly into this. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which violated international law, has made this clear once again and led to a deepening of strategic cooperation with the littoral states in East and Southeast Asia.

The German government's China strategy, presented in July 2023, also focuses on support for a "legally binding code of conduct" between China and the littoral states, "which must be in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea".²⁸

Whether this will be sufficient to effectively contain China's growing military presence and its attempts at intimidation, which are also increasingly characterized by grey zone tactics, remains questionable.

Rather, the focus must be on charting the long-term consequences of the continued growth of fragility in the greater Indo-Pacific region. Further loss of trust and militarization of the region will neither satisfy the security needs of the parties concerned nor serve security interests. Rather, the South China Sea will thus become an opaque seascape full of political obstacles. The "stormy waters" repeatedly referred to in the jargon of the Chinese leadership, through which one must manoeuvre in tense times, will certainly not become calmer as a result.

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Impressum

The authors

Jan Senkyr is Policy Advisor Foreign and Security Affairs at the Division Analysis and Consulting.

David Merkle is Desk Officer China at the Department Asia and Pacific.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Jan Senkyr

Policy Advisor Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Division Analysis and Consulting

T +49 30 / 26 996-3936

Jan.Senkyr@kas.de

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