

US- CHINA'S DISAGREEMENT OVER SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUES: A RACE FOR CONTROL? AN ANALYSIS THROUGH REALISM'S LENS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper seeks to analyze the main reasons of the disagreement over the South China Sea between the USA and one of the claimants, China. We would go about it using the theory of Realism as a basis of our analysis. This theory claims that nations, as main actors of the international system, interact with each other on the basis of their own interests - military security, economic prosperity etc. In a world where there is no authority over the nations, the latter have to protect themselves on their own means. The disputes in South China Sea are fuelled by the value maritime space and the oceanic resources values. Actually, the nation that controls the sea, can hold any of the littoral countries to ransom. The dependence of China on imported oil and due to the fact that most of its oil imports are shipped through the South China Sea, pushes it to protect its sea lanes, secure its access to closer oceanic resources and protect its territory from potential attacks that could be launched from South China Sea. Being a transit lane for both regional and international trades, many countries are also concerned about the conflicts. One of them is the United States. The United States' concern is strongly influenced by its will to maintain its own influence in the area.*

KEYWORDS: South China Sea, China, the USA, Realism

INTRODUCTION

Named as the “mother of all territorial disputes” (Baviera, 2004), South China Sea disputes are one of the hot topics in recent international relations of Asia-Pacific Region. Complex because of the different interests involved at different levels and the geopolitical importance of the sea for the region and the rest of the world, the issues are also a case of disagreement between China and the USA and might be a key element of the future of Sino-American relations. With a fast growing economy, China is a major regional power in Asia and its influence is gradually spreading to other parts of the world.

This causes a clash between the United States and China. Like many other countries, China has territorial disputes, with many of its fourteen neighboring countries, but South China Sea along with East China Sea disputes, are the ones that draw more attention. The main reason is that one or the other is a key element that might decide the future of China-USA relations –Will they be confrontational or peaceful?

Nations will go far to defend their territorial integrity, even when the territory has little strategic or economic worth, its symbolic value is often sufficiently powerful to motivate states to go to war. (Wang, 2003). This sentence reflects the importance that nations have for territories whether it is land, sea etc. and leads us directly to one of the traditional theories of International : Realism.

According to Realism, countries interaction is influenced by their national interests. Global rising energy consumption leads to a fear of scarcity, thus increases the economic and strategic

value of any potential source of energy resources in the world. This is obvious in South China Sea area that is believed to hold a considerable value of hydrocarbons. In the context of South China Sea issues, the claimed territories do not only have a symbolic value, but a strategic one. That strategic worth makes the disputes hard to resolve. Moreover, the strategic place that South China Sea holds in the maritime traffic lines network in regional and international trade causes concerns from non-claimant countries in South East Asia as well as other Asian countries as well as other parts of the world. They fear that an armed conflict would cause a disruption of regional and international trade; but as a major actor in the area, the USA's interests are more in terms of navigation and influence in the area. The main concern is mainly influenced by the race of influence with China. What are the real motivations behind the disputes for the claimants ? Why does the USA seem compelled to interfere ? Why does Beijing not want any interference from the USA ? Will Sino-USA disagreement over South China Sea issues lead to confrontation ?

South China Sea disputes : historical background

South China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea that covers an area of 3.5 millions squares kilometers and stretches from Singapore Strait to Taiwan Strait. Ten countries are bordering it : Brunei, Cambodia, mainland China and Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. It stretches from the Malacca and Singapore Straights to Taiwan Strait. Although some of the disagreements about sovereignty on some parts of the sea are resolved, especially the gulf of Thailand, the gulf of Tonkin and the Sunda continental shelf ; there are some still disputes over large portions of it, including its islands and rocks. The disputes involve mainland China, Taiwan, five ASEAN countries : Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam and have to do with the sovereignty over South China Sea's emergent lands and surrounding waters. They consist of a group of four islands consecutively known as Paracel archipelago (claimed by China and Vietnam), Spratly archipelago (claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam. Malaysia and Philippines claim some islands of the archipelago), the Pratas Islands (claimed by mainland China and Taiwan), the Macclesfield bank and Scarborough reef (claimed by the Philippines, China and Taiwan).

The protagonists mostly base their claims on historical facts. According Teshu Singh's report on South China Sea, ancient manuscripts and remains of Chinese coins and pottery are used as proofs to support its claims. She quoted naval expeditions to Spratly Islands by Han dynasty in 110 AD and the ones by the Ming dynasty from 1403-1433 AD as further cases to support Chinese claims. Moreover, in 110 AD, the Western Han dynasty had administered Hainan Island and par ricochet the Spratly and Paracel archipelagoes (Roche and Alexeeva, 2014). China refers to Pratas Islands as Dongsha qundao, the Paracel archipelago as Xisha qundao, the Spratly archipelago as Nansha qundao and the Scarborough Reef, Macclesfield Bank and Jameschoal are respectively known as Huangyan Dao, Zhongshan qundao and Zengmu Ansha.

Since the Xia dynasty, China has sovereignty over Nansha and Xisha (Shen, 2002). Official Chinese reports from different eras and dynasties had mentioned South China Sea's archipelagoes (Roche and Alexeeva, 2014). The administrative tradition of China has enabled the country to have at its disposal rich archives that, unfortunately other protagonists such Vietnam and the Philippines do not have (Roche and Alexeeva, 2014). Given the numerous historical sources, Chinese historians argue that China was the first country that discovered and administered the islands of South China (Roche and Alexeeva, 2014). During the Republic of China era (1912-1949), Chang Kai-shek's government launched three missions, consecutively in 1932, 1935 and 1947 in order to identify the islands that form Xisha (Paracel archipelago)

and Nansha (Spratly archipelago) (Guo, 2009). The map of China issued after the missions includes Xisha and Nansha as being part of Chinese territory. It also included the famous U-shape eleven dashes line. According to Zhang (2011), this delimitation had been reinforced through the issue of another map by the People's Republic of China's government in 1962 and was accepted by the Vietnamese authorities. However, two dashes were removed in 1953 as a concession to Vietnam's claim.

Vietnam based its claim on historical facts too. The first fact is the proof of Vietnamese presence in the Paracel archipelago (Xisha in Chinese and Hoang sa in Vietnamese) during the Nguyen dynasty reign period (Colin, 2011). In addition, Vietnam considered itself as the inheritor of French possessions in the region during colonization (Colin, 2011). In effect, during the French colonization period, the French took possession of the Paracel archipelago. China protested against French presence (Roche and Alexeeva, 2014). South Vietnam took possession of the Spratly archipelago in August 1956. Although, South Vietnam it admitted Chinese sovereignty over the Paracel and the Spratly archipelagoes in 1958, after the Vietnamese reunification in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam reaffirmed its sovereignty over the Spratly archipelago. On 17th May 1977, Vietnam declared an EEZ of 200 nautical miles (Colin, 2011).

In December 1939, Japan declared the occupation of the Pratas islands, Paracel and Spraly archipelagoes and used Itu Aba island as a submarine base. After, Japan's defeat during the Second World War, the San Francisco Conference of September 1951¹ stripped Japan of its conquered territories but was unable to designate a "successor" that would control the archipelagoes of South China Sea conquered by the Japanese.

As for the Philippines, the government claimed that it inherited sovereignty from Spain and the United States. The Philippines' interest for South China Sea's islands was sparked in 1976 (Colin, 2011). An adventurer and entrepreneur, Tomas Cloma, landed on the eastern coasts of Spratly archipelago and named them the Kalayaan islands.

As for Indonesia², its concern is that China's claim U-dashed line is intersecting with its Exclusive Economic Zone near the Natuna archipelago. The Chinese U-dashed line, that covers about 80% of the sea, is also overlapping Malaysia and Brunei's claimed Exclusive Economic Zones.

The lure of hydrocarbons and fish stocks

The real motives behind South China Sea disputes have a lot to do with the potential resources that the area might contain. Actually, as the demand for energy resources is increasing, countries have to find new sources to fuel their economic growth. Moreover, concern of shortage of resources is gradually becoming a hot topic. In the case of East Asia and South-East Asian countries, controlling spaces where they can have an easy access to energy resources is an issue that's worth fighting for. South China Sea is thought of as a place for large reserves

¹ It was a conference about the disposition of the territories conquered by Japan. The inability of the conference to decide to which country would the archipelagoes of South China Sea belong has led to an open to claims by the litoral countries of South China Sea.

² Miles Yu (19 November 2015). "Et tu, Jakarta?", <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/nov/19/inside-china-china-concedes-natuna-islands-to-indo/>, *Washington Times*.

of energy resources. According to Li Guoqiang³(2015), from China Institute of International Studies, “oil and gas reserves of the main basins in the South China Sea amount to 70.78 billion tons, of which petroleum deposits comprise 29.19 billion tons (with proven extractable deposits reaching up to 2 billion tons), natural gas deposits comprise 58 trillion cubic meters (with proven extractable deposits totaling 4 trillion cubic meters).” He also reported that the United States Geological Survey estimated the petroleum in South China Sea up to 5 billion tons “with confirmed petroleum reserves amounting to no more than 1 billion tons.” Moreover, he mentioned that in a report released by the United States Energy Information Administration in February 2014, South China Sea contains about 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in proven and probable reserves.

As a rising power, China needs to secure a permanent access to energy resources in order to sustain its fast growing development. Like its other North East Asian counterparts (Korea and Japan), it needs to import oil from Africa and the Middle East through South China Sea. The problem is that those regions are often subject to political instability, which might compromise the access of North East Asian countries to energy resources from those regions. Hence, the need to find new sources is indispensable. From that perspective, we can understand more the vital importance for China to keep South China Sea under control. Not only , that would reduce China’ dependence to its traditional oil suppliers – Africa, Middle East, and more recently Russia, but it can also exploit energy sources that are closer. As for the South East Asian claimant countries, the stake is high too : to exploit new resources on one hand for themselves (self-sufficiency) and on the other hand to sell energy resources to other countries.

The perspective of energy resources further complicates the disputes and is drawing as well foreign oil companies’ interests and other countries (external players) such as India. In addition, the sea is a rich fishing ground (Pitcher et al, 2000; Zou, 2009) but oil pollution and overfishing is a major threat to South China biodiversity (Pitcher et al, 2000).

A vital maritime route for trade

South China is one of the busiest maritime traffic routes in the world. It links East Asia to the Middle East, Indian Ocean, Africa and Europe through the Strait of Malacca and leads to the Pacific Ocean at the North, through Taiwan Strait. In addition, more than half of the 20 biggest sea ports are located in the area among which we have Singapore and Hong Kong. Seventy thousand cargoes sail through South China Sea every year (Boquet, 2012). Imports, especially oil, by China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan are shipped through it. If controlled by a hostile power, the South China Sea lanes could be used as leverage. Such a situation would damage China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan’s economies due to their dependence on imported oil. For instance, 70% of Japan’s energy needs and 65% of China’s energy needs are shipped through South China Sea (Schofield, 2009).

In 2009, China became the second biggest oil consumer after the United States and by 2030, it might become the largest oil consumer in the world (Buszynski, 2012). In 2010, China imported 52% of its oil needs from the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Angola supply for 66% of China’s imports. This dependence could be used by China’s competitors as a weapon against

³Li Guoqiang, “China Sea oil and gas resources”, http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2015-05/11/content_7894391.htm, China Institute of International Studies, May 11th 2015

it. Moreover, China has a long coastline that it feels to be vulnerable if not protected. In order to prevent this, Beijing is trying to assert sovereignty over South China Sea, especially when the area is getting more attention from countries like Japan, India and the USA. An international recognition of its sovereignty in the area is a major asset of protecting and defending itself. What are the stakes for the USA and the two other Asian regional powers : India and Japan?

It is important to recall that the race for influence between China, India and Japan is another reason fuelling their interests. Japan and India are also concerned by the disputes because it is in the interest of not only North East and South East Asian countries, but also all Asian countries that South China Sea issues to be resolved peacefully. Due to the importance of the South China Sea traffic lines, a crisis in the area can have a damaging impacts on their economies. As Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong⁴, on September 2012, at the Central Party School said : *“Trade is the lifeblood of our economy. Our foreign trade is three times our GDP, Freedom of navigation is therefore a fundamental interest, especially along our sea lanes of communications...the South China Sea is strategically important for our survival and development. However the South China Sea disputes play out, freedom of navigation must be maintained. Ships of many nations use the South China Sea, so I am sure these countries would share Singapore’s concern on this point. If not, it could disrupt both regional and international exchanges.”* He clearly highlighted the importance of stability in the sea for regional and international trades.

USA’s concerns in South China Sea

For the USA, it is its influence over South East Asia that is at stake. Its big fear is coming to reality : A rising China is questioning its hegemony, not only in Asia but elsewhere too. The question to know if China will rise is no more to be asked; the sleeping giant, as labeled by Napoleon, has awoken.

In the realist view of the world, the international system is characterized by anarchy (Morgenthau, 1973; Waltz 1979) and the main actors of this system – the States are self-interested and compete for power (Morgenthau 1973; Waltz 1979). That competition for power naturally pushes states to the logic of survival and security. But even there is no authority above the nations; a hierarchy in terms of power exists. There are some nations that are more powerful than others (Viotti and Kauppi, 2003). It is clear that during the cold war, two countries were the most powerful : the Soviet Union and the USA. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the USA remains the sole superpower until the early 21st century, when countries such as Russia, India and China started rising. When rising, States’ interests tend to be expansionist.

In order to preserve their territory, secure resources in order to sustain their growth, rising States need to establish their own sphere of influence, especially in their vicinity. By doing this and due to the anarchical characteristic of the international system, they use any means at their disposal to reach their goals. Thus, they have no choice but to question the influence of previous established superpowers or regional powers when they were still considered as “weak” states. They are then seen by others states (neighboring sates and established powers) as a threat. This situation brings both parties into conflicts (Friedberg, 2005), but the conflict might also emerge among rising powers, because the motto for all is survival. In the context of South China Sea, beyond the disagreement between the claimants, it is a war of influence between the USA and China that is taking place. The world hegemon, the USA, does not want a “peer competitor”.

⁴ Extracted from Thomas Hogue, “South China Sea: Best Case Scenario”, Insight, November 2012

It is normal and natural for a rising power or an already established power to insist on having its own periphery/sphere of influence. China is progressively building its own periphery in Asia. This is mainly due to its fast growing economy and its foreign policy towards the neighboring countries : “....to better serve Chinese interests during “this important period of strategic opportunity”, China need to strive to ensure four “environments” : a peaceful and stable international environment; a neighborly and friendly environment in surrounding regions; a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefits; and an objective and friendly media environment” (extract of Hu Jintao’s speech from Mingjiang 2008).

The several projects of infrastructures that are being carried out in Central Asia and South East Asia are perfect illustrations of this policy. They are meant to bring those countries closer to China. An economic integration and interdependence between China and its neighboring countries, especially the ASEAN countries, is increasing. All these maneuvers are conflicting with the USA’s interests in the region. China is growing as a major regional power and is gradually replacing the USA in the region. This situation might undermine the USA’s credibility and commitments⁵ to its allies in Eastern Asia. China and ASEAN countries are more likely to get closer with the ASEAN-China Free trade Area that was created in January 2010. The interdependence between China and South East Asian countries is likely to influence China’s decision to seek for a peaceful resolution of South China Sea issues, even if it is a dilemma of keeping stable relations with ASEAN countries and at the same time preserving its national interests.

In Realism, interdependence is seen as a situation of vulnerability by one nation to another and should be avoided, so nations should minimize dependency. Dependency on others states should be minimized, but other states on one may be desirable, because it may increase control over them. (Viotti and Kauppi 2003 : 58). In China-ASEAN relations, interdependence is mutual : none of the parties has interest in fighting each other. However, ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Philippines fear an unbalanced interdependence. Hence they are looking for a stronger power that might help to contain China’s growing influence. They are naturally turning to the USA. The USA has always seen itself as a global peacekeeper and has alliances with some of China’s neighbors.

According to Leszek Buszynski, the Obama Administration rejected a Chinese idea of spheres of influence, because they might push the USA to an “offshore position with little corresponding influence in the region” and to undermine its credibility to its allies in the region. It can be deduced from Leszek Buszynski’s point of view, that there is a power vacuum in South East Asia – The USA has gradually left its role as peacekeeper in the area and that power vacuum is being filled in by China. From a realist perspective of power transition theory, the question of filling a power vacuum left by a superpower leads to a confrontation between the superpower and the challenger(s). In this context, confrontation might be unavoidable between the USA and China.

In a self-help environment, as realists describe the international system, a rising economy is naturally compelled to protect itself. China is not an exception to this rule. The Middle Kingdom’s economic rise is naturally leading to the reinforcement of People’s Liberation Army, that allows Beijing to protect its interests not only in Asia, but also around the globe, thus posing a serious challenge to the USA both regionally and globally. Hence the need for

⁵ To protect their allies in case of aggression and the allies commit themselves to let the USA to set bases on their territories

the USA to put pressure on China by asserting its interests in South China Sea and strengthening ties with the other claimants. Washington's interests are freedom of navigation and over flight (USA's access to the waters of South China Sea), peaceful resolution of conflicts in South China Sea, diplomatic collaboration in resolving the territorial disputes, a negotiation of a Code of Conduct, making claims in South China Sea in conformity to the United Nations Convention on Law of Sea (Peter van Ham et al, March 2016 ; Bader et al, 2014), even though the USA has not signed the convention. An access to the waters of the South China Sea is important for the USA because its naval forces based in Asia-Pacific region sail through the waters of South China Sea to reach the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Washington could also naturally be interested in the hydrocarbons of the sea.

USA-China over South China Sea : confrontation or cooperation

Obama's "Pivot to Asia " or "rebalance" towards Asia-Pacific region is a strategic approach in order to enhance its presence in Asia, in other words to fill in the power vacuum in Asia-Pacific Region. It consists of the increase of naval assets in Singapore and Australia, the increase of troops in South Korea. Actually, free transit through South China Sea is indispensable for USA in order to project its military power in the region and also observe maneuvers of challengers such as China and India. The pivot consists of strengthening its relations with allies located in the area and maintaining a military presence in the area. Unfortunately, American military presence is seen as potential threat by Beijing. A potential scenario will be that a reinforced American presence can take China to ransom by blocking the sea lanes and might prevent Chinese naval power to use its full potential in case of wartime. Although the USA is claiming that it is neutral in the disputes, several conferences and lectures over the Chinese maritime policy and the creation of China Maritime Studies Institute in the US Naval war college in 2006 are proofs of the USA's concerns over China's position and its implications in the disputes (Colin, S., 2011). It is also hard to think that Chinese concerns over the US military presence in Asia-Pacific are not justified. In fact, the USA has five bilateral agreements in Asia-Pacific region with countries that are at the doorstep of China (Japan⁶, South Korea⁷, Philippines, ⁸Thailand⁹, Australia and New Zealand¹⁰). Moreover, the USA has a strategic access to Singapore and the PACOM¹¹ covers 43 countries.

Furthermore, the main goal of PACOM is to protect the vital interests of the United States in the Pacific Region among other things. In order to maintain a dynamic PACOM, the USA needs to feel free to sail through the waters of Asia Pacific region. But the idea of tolerating US navy to sail free through South China Sea is not comforting for Beijing. The main reasons are that Beijing fears for its maritime routes and maritime security. A reinforced presence of the US navy in the area would be seen as a further step to a strategy of encircling and containing China. In addition to the military bases in South Korea and the THAAD¹², their bases in Central Asia, the USA can set other bases in the territory of its allies in South China Sea.

Given the rivalry of both nations, Beijing's fear is quite understandable. It is hard to tell if there will be cooperation or confrontation between the two powers. On one hand, there is Beijing

⁶ Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (signed in 1951, revised in 1960)

⁷ US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty (signed in 1953)

⁸ Mutual Defense Treaty (Manilla Pact, 1954)

⁹ Manilla Pact, Thanat-Rust Communiqué (signed in 1962)

¹⁰ Manilla Pact, Australia, New Zealand, United States Treaty (signed in 1951)

¹¹ Known as United States Pacific Command or USPACOM

¹² Terminal High Altitude Area Defence

willing to solve the issues through bilateral talks and at the same time assert its interests in the area, and on the other hand, Washington D.C. is struggling to maintain itself in the area.

To answer the question, one has to keep in mind the USA's policy towards China, especially during Barack Obama's administration. Watanabe Tsuneo¹³ distinguishes two main schools of thought that have directed USA's policy towards China. He labeled them as the "Kissinger school" and the "Marshall school." The first one, led by Henry Kissinger, is more oriented towards cooperation, while the other one led by Andrew Marshall, is "containment/confrontation" oriented. He linked up the schools to two major trends among the four policy trend groups he quoted in his article¹⁴. They are respectively:

- i. Group A: For this group, a rising China poses a challenge for the USA. They are skeptical about a "positive" effect of economic interdependence and advocate a confrontational policy towards China. Some members of a faction in the group, called the Blue team, advocate for the use of military power to promote democracy around the world.
- ii. Group B: Members of this group have moderate and pragmatic positions. Some of them advocate that economic cooperation would lead to a less belligerent and helpful partner in the security and political arenas. Others claim that the USA should hedge against a potential military confrontation with China.
- iii. Group C: the members of this group think that deeper economic ties would lead to a more cooperative China.
- iv. Group D: this group is more human rights and trade protection oriented.

For Watanabe Tsuneo, "Kissinger school" is closer to the group C and the "Marshall school" is closer to the group A. Obama's administration during his first term has seen China as a potential partner when it comes to international issues. Watanabe Tsuneo said that "...Obama shifted his China policy from one of cooperative engagement to cautious engagement in order to hedge against China's military expansion and its assertive behavior toward its neighbors." Does the USA really care about Beijing's interaction with its neighbors or Washington is more concerned with the impacts Beijing's military rising abilities? John Mearsheimer subtly paved the way to an approach to answer this question: "*if China continues to grow economically over the next 30 years, much the way it has over the past 30 years, that it will translate that wealth into military might. And it will try to dominate Asia, the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere*"¹⁵. Surely, the USA does not want China dominating Asia and feels compelled to get involved in South China Sea issues and the different warnings of Washington to Beijing through President Barack Obama, John Kerry and Hillary Clinton, in addition to the aggressive statements of Admiral Harry Harris demonstrates clearly that. Moreover, their statements and actions seemed all to point at Beijing and tend to support the others claimants. For instance, during the APEC Summit of Manila, president Obama said that it was the USA's commitment to defend their allies by ensuring security of the waters in the region and freedom of navigation. He even added that two vessels should be transferred to the Philippines. It is also clear that Beijing attaches importance to sovereignty,

¹³ <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2014/us-engagement-policy-toward-china2>

¹⁴ <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2014/us-engagement-policy-toward-china>

¹⁵ Extracted from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-navarro-and-greg-autry/mearsheimer-on-strangling_b_9417476.html

thus rejects any Washington-led solutions. Instead, it wants bilateral discussions with the other claimants.

CONCLUSION

“Sovereignty disputes are complex and hard to resolve. No side can easily abandon their claims without high political costs.” This quote by Lee Hsien Loong¹⁶ summed up the situation of South China Sea. The claimants have rigid positions. From realism’s perspective, the conflicts in South China Sea are triggered by the maritime resources of South China Sea and the large strategic maritime space that if controlled, can be a powerful weapon or asset in the hands of the claimants as well as their external allies. Rivalry between China and the USA is a big challenge within the South China Sea issues : A rivalry of power and influence over Asia, especially in Central Asia and South East Asia. States having territorial disputes are more inclined to fight each other than other countries (Vasquez, 1993). In the South China Sea context, Chinese authorities want to solve the issues through bilateral cooperation, with no interference of external actors.

More than freedom of navigation, Washington might want to get a hold on the hydrocarbons of South China Sea and at the same time, keep an eye on China and contain it through a woven “thread” of allied countries surrounding China. That is the biggest fear of Beijing – having Washington’s troops in its immediate vicinity. That is why China does not want USA’s interference in the issues. Moreover, China needs stability in the region and peaceful relations with the ASEAN countries. It is the largest trading partner of ASEAN and having an adverse relation with them, might push them to get closer to the USA and China’s other competitors. Therefore, China is trying to solve the disputes and at the same time protect its national interests. Finally, the interference of the USA in the issues is purely strategic. *The fundamental goal of states in any relationship is to prevent others from achieving advances in their relative capabilities* (Geico, 1988). Washington is trying to maintain its interests as an hegemon. Beyond issues between neighbors, in South China Sea, it is a struggle for influence hat is being played between China and the USA.

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¹⁶ Extracted from Thomas Hogue, “South China Sea: Best Case Scenario”, Insight, November 2012

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