

The Impact of the South China Sea Conflict on the Political Environment of the Asia-Pacific Region

أثر النزاع في بحر الصين الجنوبي على البيئة السياسية لمنطقة آسيا والمحيط الهادي

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Abstract

The South China Sea is a strategic area not only for China and other conflicting countries, but also for the United States. The geostrategic reasons - which are the strategic importance of the South China Sea and its enormous and varied natural resources along with changing the center global economic gravity to East Asia, United States shifting its focus to the Asia-Pacific region in parallel with China's acceleration in building its military force on the regional chessboard with South China Sea in center due to its ambition to be a dominant regional power- seems to push each party to stick to its position, and refrain to give any concessions, which mean that chances of resolving the dispute are dwindling, and the conflict will continue for long, as it will be influential factor in determining the future of relations between the countries' region and the future of the Asian region as a whole.

This study aims to analyzing and clarifying the impact of the conflict in the South China Sea on the political environment formation of the Asia-Pacific region and the inter-regional interactions and policies. The impact of this conflict has not only been on the conflict parties, but also on the regional level as a whole. In addition, there are some external forces as United States affected the course of events in the region and the form of strategic interactions therein.

This study is based on the principles, components, concepts and schools of the theory of realism, especially the Balance of Powers policy in most parts of the study, as the de facto data indicate that power and national interest is still the main driver of the foreign policy behavior for countries. This is the situation appears to be the dispute in the South China Sea and political implications.

Keywords: South China Sea, China, United States, Political Environment, Asia and the Pacific, Strategic Balance.

المستخلص:

يمثل بحر الصين الجنوبي منطقة استراتيجية حيوية، ليس فقط للصين والدول المتنازعة عليه وإنما كذلك للولايات المتحدة. ويبدو أن الأسباب الجيوستراتيجية التي تتمثل في الأهمية الاستراتيجية لبحر الصين الجنوبي، ووجود موارد طبيعية متنوعة وهائلة في هذا البحر، مع تغير مركز النقل الاقتصادي العالمي إلى شرق آسيا، و تحويل الولايات المتحدة لتركيزها إلى منطقة آسيا والمحيط الهادي بالتوازي مع بناء الصين لقوتها العسكرية بشكل متنام على رقعة الشطرنج الإقليمية و مركزها بحر الصين الجنوبي بسبب طموحها نحو أن تكون قوة إقليمية مهيمنة تدفع كل طرف إلى التشبث بمواقفه والامتناع عن تقديم أية تنازلات مما يشير إلى أن فرص تسوية الخلاف ضئيلة، وأن النزاع سيستمر لمدة طويلة، كما أنه سيكون عاملاً مؤثراً في تحديد مستقبل العلاقات بين دول المنطقة، ومستقبل المنطقة الآسيوية ككل.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل وتوضيح أثر النزاع في بحر الصين الجنوبي على تشكيل البيئة السياسية لمنطقة آسيا والمحيط الهادي وما تتضمنه من تفاعلات وسياسات بين دول المنطقة، والذي اتضح أن أثر هذا النزاع لم يقتصر على أطراف النزاع وحدهم وإنما امتد تأثيره على المستوى الإقليمي ككل، بالإضافة إلى وجود قوى خارجية والمتمثل في الولايات المتحدة أثرت على مجريات الأحداث في المنطقة وشكل التفاعلات الاستراتيجية فيها.

وهذه الدراسة تستند على مبادئ ومكونات ومفاهيم ومدارس النظرية الواقعية وخاصة سياسة توازن القوى في أغلب جنابات الدراسة باعتبار أن معطيات الأمر الواقع تقيد بأن القوة والمصلحة الوطنية مازالتا المحرك الباعث الرئيسي لسلوك السياسة الخارجية للدول، وهذا ما تقيد به الحالة التي يبدو عليها النزاع في بحر الصين الجنوبي والآثار السياسية المرتبة عليه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بحر الصين الجنوبي، الصين، الولايات المتحدة، البيئة السياسية، آسيا والمحيط الهادي، التوازن الاستراتيجي.

I Introduction

The South China Sea is considered one of the most contentious and intricate parts of the world, and the South China Sea conflict is a complex political issue due to the overlap of a set of issues related to this sea (Kipgen, 2020:17). The present study will analyze the implications of the conflict in the South China Sea on the political environment of the region, as the study seeks to clarify that the South China Sea conflict may affect a large group of neighboring countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and may contribute to the political environment shaping of interactions and relationships among the region's countries. Consequently, this study represents an

added value to the scientific contributions which tackled the repercussions of a conflict over a certain region, which may reach beyond the parties to the conflict.

Disputes over a region have largely become a major cause of international conflicts, given that effective control over this region is a prerequisite for the state's power and influence. Hence, threatening the security of this region is considered a threat to the security of the state in its entirety and to its territorial integrity. Accordingly, the researchers considered that disputes over territories are among the main factors explaining the emergence of international conflicts. It is always expected that the countries involved in such conflicts join alliances, tend to escalate, enhance their military capabilities, and engage in military confrontations. Consequently, the conflict over a region is considered a fundamental factor in the normalization of relations between the states of a certain region of a conflicting nature (Senese, 2005: 769).

In addition, disputes over a region affect a wide range of phenomena, the most prominent of which is that they affect the form of interactions between states to make them more competitive, as countries view each other as rivals threatening their basic and vital interests; this theory may even develop to make conflict an existential issue and not just a conflict to take control of a region. Therefore, conflicts over a region may escalate into wars, especially against relatively weak states. As for the countries that are geographically distant from these conflicts, they tend to participate in an already existing war rather than igniting a war (Rasler and Thompson, 2006: 145).

Moreover, conflict over a region can be ended and resolved through reaching agreements that involve a peaceful settlement to this conflict, but the hegemony of a state over a disputed territory leads to tipping the balance of power in its favour, driving it to infringe agreements and settlements signed in this regard. This may cause mistrust between the parties to the agreement, which leads to the continuation of the state of rivalry and hostility between the parties to the conflict, unless a peaceful agreement is reached and seriously committed to by all parties (Rider and Owsiak, 2015: 508).

Also, disputes over territories not only affect the form of interactions and relations between the countries of the region in which the disputed territories are located, but also affect the domestic policies of these countries. Whereas, external threats ensuing from this conflict may push the state towards preparing for war, and therefore encourage its political regime to concentrate power in its hands, which may impede the process of democratic transition and enable authoritarian rulers to remain in their positions and tighten control over the state, and it may also lead to inequality at the level of domestic policies. In this context, some researchers believe that negotiation and a peaceful solution regarding the conflict over a certain region favours the possibility of democratic transition for neighbouring countries, whereby the conflict over a certain region and the ensuing external threats lead to the concentration

of power in the hands of the state and obstructing democracy, while the decline of the frequency of these threats facing the state increases the possibility of democratic transition under state authority delegation and decentralization, especially since public opinion no longer pays attention to these external threats and has become more focused on the state's internal affairs and political rights (Gibler and Tir, 2010: 951).

Since most of the previous literature focused on the impact of the conflict over a region on the countries directly involved in this conflict, and did not refer to the wider implications and effects of such a conflict on the level of the political environment of the region as a whole, this study elucidates the impact of the conflict over the South China Sea region on the political environment of the Asia-Pacific region and the interactions and relations it entails between the countries of this region, in addition to the escalation and deterioration of the China-US relations regarding the South China Sea conflict, although the United States is not a direct party to this conflict, and this is because of existing vital interests of the United States in the disputed region at a time when China is exhibiting willingness to use force to impose its influence on this region and proceed with being a regional power dominating Asia as a whole as such orientations are reflected in its firm policy in this regard.

II Causes of the conflict in the South China Sea and its parties

The geostrategic scene in the South China Sea, with its riparian states and its strategic importance, represent the main conflict in the Asia-Pacific region due to the overlap and complexity that characterizes the positions and obstinacy of the conflicting countries regarding this dispute (Buszynski and Sazlan, 2007: 144). The past few years have been rife with conflict and disagreement between China and its neighbouring countries due to the South China Sea Islands, as China and the neighbouring countries claimed sovereignty over these islands and the surrounding waters. These confrontations raised the concerns of the countries of Southeast Asia, given that such events portend a future in which China is looking to tighten its grip on the entire region. This possibility also represents a direct challenge to the US policy in East Asia and its presence in the region (McDevitt, 2013: 175).

Therefore, the South China Sea is one of the most contentious and complex parts of the world, and the South China Sea issue is a complex political one due to the overlap of a set of issues related to this sea. The sea points in the South China Sea are claimed entirely or partly by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. According to the 1982 Law of the Sea, all countries bordering the South China Sea have the right to exercise their rights within the exclusive economic zone which extends to 200 nautical miles. And since the disputed islands are located within the exclusive economic zones of these countries, then China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei have the right to sovereignty over these islands, but the fact that

these islands are located in the middle of the South China Sea has increased the complexity of the situation and the intensity of the disputes. Except for Brunei, some of these islands are occupied by the five disputing countries via military or paramilitary force (The Stimson Centre, December 2014).

For many decades, the frequency of conflicts increased at times and decreased at other times, and most of these disputes took place between China on one side and one or more of the five countries - mentioned above - on the other side. This is because China's demands so far are the most extensive and comprehensive ones, as China claims control of about 80% of the South China Sea, while it rejects and prevents any activity by other claimant countries in the disputed areas, in which they claim their rights. This is what the countries bordering the South China Sea strongly oppose, which also contradicts the delimitation of maritime boundaries law approved by the United Nations. Despite the ASEAN countries' attempts to internationalize the issue and make the exploitation of these areas a shared right, China reasserts each time its sovereignty over all the South China Sea Islands, which has led to increasing tensions among the conflicting countries. The recent rise in the American presence in the region has intensified these tensions (Centre for Studies Al Jazeera, 13 May 2012).

It is worth noting that the existing tensions in the South China Sea can be traced back to 2009, when Vietnam and Malaysia submitted a joint request to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf regarding their demands for continental shelves beyond their exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea. China reacted severely by submitting a memorandum to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in which it criticized the Vietnamese and Malaysian violations of its rights and demands and clarified the undisputed sovereignty of China over the islands in the South China Sea and the surrounding waters. But what is worth noting is that China attached a mysterious map that includes almost the entire sea. This map indicates a U-shaped line, called the "Nine-Dash Line." This is the first time that China has officially used this map to support its claims in the South China Sea (Council of Foreign Relations, 14 May 2014).

Based on the above, the image of the South China Sea has become blurry, since China is submitting its demands based on the historical water assertions and insisting on them, which were delimited through the Nine-Dash Line. The other claimants also failed to fully explain their demands in accordance with international law. This confusion about claims in the South China Sea does not serve any party's interests. Accordingly, Southeast Asian countries who claim their rights in the South China Sea should precisely define their demands. If the basic truth is not clear, China will continue to employ its vague and contradictory demands in order to pursue its interests at the expense of its neighbouring countries. Several steps have already been taken in this direction (CSIS, 17 July 2013).

The main reason behind the conflict over the islands and surrounding waters in the South China Sea is the strategic importance of these islands and waters because they contain important natural resources such as oil, natural gas, fisheries and others. This is in addition to the important strategic location of the South China Sea, as it constitutes the maritime heart of Southeast Asia, through which commercial shipments worth five trillion dollars, equivalent to half of the world's shipping traffic, are transited. The South China Sea is also a major energy supply passageway (Buszynski, 2013: 4).

Consequently, the economic and strategic potential of the South China Sea represents principal motives for the claimant countries competing for sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction over this sea, and represents basic motives for China to consolidate its strategic position and weight in the Asia-Pacific region. The South China Sea is also of crucial importance for China as it is considered a safety shield for its national security. Therefore, countries close to China fear the growth of China's military capabilities and the development of its naval capabilities in particular, and they actually may not fear in the short-term military invasions that China may carry out, but they inevitably fear that they might be forced at some point to recognize Chinese hegemony instead of opposing it (Centre for Studies Al Jazeera, 7 April 2014).

As for the other countries that are not claiming any rights in the South China Sea, especially the United States, they are mostly concerned, in terms of the conflict in this region, about how to preserve freedom of navigation in the most important and vital seas in the world.

Generally speaking, it can be argued that controlling the Pacific Ocean, especially the East and South China Seas, has remained a strategic ambition of the major powers throughout the ages, as it represents the geopolitically dominant maritime phenomenon over the entire Southeast Asia region, and it also includes some important strategic corridors that control the international maritime traffic.

Based on the foregoing, the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea represent a direct threat to the security of East Asia in terms of the possibility of their escalation into an armed conflict between the conflicting parties, which is an existing and strong possibility, as clashes have already occurred between the conflicting countries (will be referred to later). In addition, all countries that are considered party to these conflicts reinforce their orientation towards armament and forming modern military forces, in addition to increasing some of them due to their association with the United States through joint defence agreements, which makes the spill over of the conflict in the event it occurs more than just a regional conflict (Centre for A New American Security, 9 January 2012).

Accordingly, resolving the maritime boundary dispute of the South China Sea is a difficult and complex question due to the overlapping and contradictory demands.

Also, what makes the situation more difficult and complex is the difference between the claimants on the method and form of negotiation; China prefers bilateral negotiations over multilateral negotiations, while other countries request negotiations between China and the ASEAN countries as a single bloc.

Consequently, if the claimants from Southeast Asian states present an agreed framework for precisely determining the object of controversy based on a clear and strong legal basis, then in this case they will unite their fronts before China in any contentious point, and they will force it to explain its claimed demands and rights. In this context, it is worth noting that the presence of the United States in the region may be important to creating a sense of security in Southeast Asia, thus creating a space for ASEAN countries to pressure China toward negotiation and conflict settlement, provided that its role is to support any endeavour to resolve the South China Sea disputes peacefully and without its involvement in the conflict (Joffe, 2007: 57-58).

III The Chinese factor in the South China Sea conflict

The maritime conflict over the islands, coral reefs and surrounding waters in the South China Sea in the past few years has gained more international interest, due to the overlapping demands of six countries, these demands being: territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea, also because it has become a direct threat to the security and stability of the East Asian region, and the conflict areas include the main communication lines that connect Southeast Asia with Northeast Asia, and cover vast fishing grounds, in addition to huge revenues from oil and natural gas. In this ongoing conflict over the South China Sea, no country has received more attention than China had. This is due to its expansionist and vague demands, and its use of force to control these islands, in addition to its increasing military and naval capabilities. This has resulted in great concerns by the Southeast Asian countries as well as the United States, given China's insistence on constantly strengthening and confirming its claims. Contrary to China's relatively flexible approach vis-à-vis the South China Sea conflict, which it has adopted at times, it appeared stubborn and intransigent when addressing the dispute (Zhang, 2020: 759). Since the mid-1990s, China has pursued a strategy of stalling on the conflict in the South China Sea, and the main objective of this strategy is to support and affirm its demands - especially maritime rights - and deter other countries and prevent them from consolidating their own demands, including resource development projects that exclude China, and since the mid-2000s, China's steps have increased towards seeking to support and emphasize its demands, via the use of diplomatic, administrative and military means (as we will explain later) (Fravel, 2011: 293).

To understand the policy and strategy pursued by China in the South China Sea, it is necessary to first address China's interests and demands in the South China Sea, based on which China acts.

III-1 China's interests and demands in the South China Sea

China's interests in the South China Sea are a complex and intertwined mixture of the desire to exploit the natural resources of this sea - both real and imagined resources - and the desire to preserve its security and establish its sovereignty and hegemony. Sovereignty and resources are closely interlinked; sovereignty over terrestrial areas of islands and rocks creates the basis for a claim to the resources inside and under the water. China claims sovereignty over all terrestrial islands in the South China Sea, especially the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, and maritime rights over the waters surrounding these islands.

The foundation for China's territorial claims in the South China Sea is the statement issued by the Chinese Prime Minister in 1951, as he declared in this statement China's sovereignty and hegemony over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and in September 1958, China reaffirmed its claims over these islands; the 1958 Declaration is particularly special since for the first time China linked its territorial sovereignty claims to its maritime rights over the surrounding waters, and over the past forty years, China has used official government data in almost the same language to describe China's undisputed sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands (McDevitt, 2013: 178).

At a time when the international legal system for the seas emerged and evolved, China began to coordinate and regulate its legal claims on maritime rights by issuing domestic legislation. These legislations and laws made the Chinese legal system in harmony - formally - with the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (issued in 1982). In 1992, the Chinese parliament passed a law on the territorial sea and the "contiguous zone" of China; that law reaffirmed the content of the 1958 Declaration while containing more specific language, and in the wake of this law, China issued baselines for its territorial waters in 1996, and in 1998, the Chinese parliament ratified a law on the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf of China. In this law, China demanded additional maritime rights that exceeded the rights contained in the 1992 law.

Despite the foregoing, the scope of the Chinese demands has remained vague – so far- and this ambiguity is due to several reasons, most notably:

First: Many of the islands claimed by China in the South China Sea do not qualify as islands according to Article (121) Paragraph (3) of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and therefore this cannot be considered a basis by which to claim that these islands be exclusive economic zones.

Second: One of the reasons for the ambiguity of the Chinese demands is the historical rights claimed by China in the South China Sea. Article 14 of the 1998 Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone stipulates that this law may not affect the historical rights enjoyed by China. Although some Chinese political analysts indicated that the South China Sea is considered historical waters, the 1998 law did not specify the content or spatial scope of these historical rights, in addition to the non-existence of a Chinese law describing what these rights might contain.

Third: the ambiguity of Chinese demands also arises from the so-called "Nine-Dash Line" which appears on Chinese official maps. One of the main inconvenient and ambiguous aspects of the South China Sea disputes is the presence of the so-called "Nine-Dash Line" or the U-shaped line on Chinese maps, comprising about 80% of the South China Sea. This line initially appeared officially on the map of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1947, and then appeared on the maps of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949. Those maps did not specify exactly what was meant by this line in terms of demands and rights, and according to what was drawn regarding this line on Chinese maps, it turns out that it encroaches on and violates the exclusive economic zones of the other contesting countries in the South China Sea.

It is worth noting that the ambiguity of the "nine-dash line" has major political repercussions for two reasons. First, China has tried hard to stop the discovery and exploitation of resources located in the disputed areas - which fall within the scope of the nine-dash line- by any coastal state in that region. This matter not only directly challenges the system based on the rules and laws that the United States and its allies are trying to establish in this region, but also accelerates the risks of managing the conflict. The second reason consists in the fact that the existence of the nine-dash line creates confirmation and insistence that this line weakens the ability and willingness of the other claimants to engage in joint production with China, and also weakens the ability and willingness of oil and gas companies to invest capital in developing hydrocarbon resources in the South China Sea (Scott, 2016: 298).

With regard to China's security vision of its maritime borders, security along these borders has been a major protracted issue, as all the conflicts, wars and attacks that China was subjected to came mainly from the sea, so China's security concerns are based, at the present time, with regard to approaching its maritime borders, on four main factors: The first factor lies in China's economic weight which concentrates in its eastern sea coast, which makes it vulnerable to attack from the sea. The second factor is the need to prevent Taiwan's stability, and if necessary, to deter or defeat any relief force of the US Navy if China chooses to attack Taiwan. Meanwhile, the third factor is the international seaborne trade which is the primary engine of Chinese economic growth, including the fact that China's economic development relies heavily on oil and natural gas obtained by sea. The final factor is China's global economic and political

interests, which may be supported by the maritime capacity for sustainable global operations (Rosyidin, 2019: 214).

Based on the above, controlling the South China Sea is an important matter for China; even international reports indicated that China has described the South China Sea as a vital area for it, and that China's sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the surrounding waters represents a top national interest on the list of China's supreme interests.

In short, it can be argued that China has important economic and military interests in the South China Sea that it seeks to achieve, the most prominent of which are:

1- The economic and strategic recovery that may occur in the event of judicial sovereignty over the islands and waters of the South China Sea, as this will grant China the right to benefit from the natural resources at sea, especially hydrocarbons and fisheries. In addition, most Chinese trade flows through this sea, including 80% of China's oil imports. It is worth noting that several analysts mention that one of the important strategic goals of China is to reduce its dependence on the oil it imports from the Arab Gulf states and Africa. Therefore, China seeks and insists on controlling the South China Sea given its enormous oil and natural gas revenues.

2- The South China Sea constitutes an important security source for southern China and stemming from China's desire to protect its territories and its economic weight from any attack that might arise from the South China Sea, China seeks to control this sea. Also, this sea will be an important scene for warfare operations in any conflict that may erupt between China and other countries, besides, any attempt to blockade China in time of war will take place in these waters (Fangyin, 2016: 888-889).

III-2 China's policy toward the South China Sea conflict

In any regional conflict, states seek to follow one of the following three general strategies in managing their demands. First, the state can follow a strategy of cooperation, and that strategy excludes the use of force or the threat to use it and includes either negotiating the disputed territory or focusing demands on an actual part of the region. Second, the state can resort to a strategy of escalation, and in this strategy the state engages in coercive diplomacy to achieve a desired result at the negotiating table or use force to tighten control over the disputed territory. Third, the state can adopt a strategy of stalling which includes maintaining the state's claim of a specific piece of land without making concessions or using force (Fravel, 2008: 10-11). This strategy is the most common and mostly used by states in regional conflicts.

Countries seek to follow this strategy for several different reasons: First, if the state is weaker than its opponent in military terms, in this case the strategy of stalling allows it to gain more time to strengthen its position and achieve a better result in the

future, whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield. Second, if any conflict is perceived as difficult and intractable, the procrastination strategy can emerge as a form of conflict management. Third, this strategy can allow any state to support its demand and strengthen its position within the existing conflict.

As for China, its approach in managing the conflict has changed from time to time. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China has continuously sought to entrench its presence in the South China Sea shortly after the establishment of the republic. In 1950, China occupied Woody Island, which is the largest of the islands in the Paracel archipelagos, and - afterwards- it developed this island and transformed it into a small naval base and allowed ship patrols to roam the neighbouring islands (Fravel, 2011: 297).

In 1974, China tightened its grip on the entire Paracel archipelagos following a short clash with the forces of South Vietnam, and Chinese fishing boats became more active and effective in the surrounding waters, but after China tightened its grip on the Paracel Islands, its position remained weak in the South China Sea, because in the late seventies, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan and Malaysia occupied and controlled a large group of Spratly Islands, meaning that five countries, including China, share these islands. The problem for China is that it does not occupy the major islands in the Spratly Islands, while the best three parts are in the hands of Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines (McDevitt, 2013: 177).

China turned to an escalation strategy in the mid-1980s; following the increasing interest in maritime rights in Asia in the early 1980s, and also in the wake of the continued occupation of the islands by the other claimants, Chinese leaders decided in early 1987 to establish and consolidate a permanent and strong status in the region via occupying a group of vacant islands, and indeed this was implemented in January 1988, when the People's Liberation Army Navy reached the "Fiery Cross" island, and the conflict raged between the Chinese and Philippine forces to tighten their control over the occupied islands in this region. In March 1988, following China's occupation of about three islands, the Chinese navy clashed with the Vietnamese naval forces due to the conflict over "Johnson Island", which killed seventy Vietnamese, and after the conflict came to an end, China was able to control about six of the planned islands.

China's entry in Spratly Islands marked the start of a new phase of competition and instability in the South China Sea. Competition over the islands reached its peak with the Chinese occupation of "Mischief Island" in the Spratly Islands in 1994, and then China returned afterwards to the procrastination strategy to support and consolidate its status, and since the 1990s, China has sought to effectively manage its diplomacy and adopt a more moderate approach considering its need to improve relations with ASEAN countries. In 1995, China and the Philippines signed a code of conduct, and in November 2002, China and the ASEAN countries signed an agreement

and a declaration on the conduct of the parties in the South China Sea as a means and measure to build confidence between the parties and reduce risks and disputes. China has also actively supported the idea of setting the conflict aside and starting to build common ground with the other claimants, and in 2005, China, Vietnam and the Philippines signed an agreement with the aim of conducting seismic surveys in the South China Sea, but this agreement was suspended in 2008 following controversy over it in the Philippines.

It is worth noting in this context that many Chinese analysts firmly adhere to the view stating that the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was not effective in preventing other claimants from taking actions that advance their demands and exploit the energy resources in the South China Sea at the expense of Chinese interests. Regardless of the growing fear of losing valuable economic resources, the biggest concern of Chinese analysts is that the Chinese claims regarding the South China Sea which are based on historical foundations, do not bear much weight in the contemporary international legal environment. Chinese legal experts believe that occupation and effective and continuous management are better than historical discovery or historical entitlement (Global China, November 2019).

Accordingly, it is clear that China's strategy to manage its demands and rights in the South China Sea focused on postponing any settlement of the existing disputes, with the occupation of the disputed islands at certain points and a certain time in order to strengthen and support its status, and China's strategy came in response to the actions and conducts of other claimants in the conflict. China uses a set of different methods to support this strategy and to achieve the objectives it pursues in the South China Sea, mainly:

III-2-1 The diplomatic method

China uses the diplomatic tool in various ways to show off the state's political competence and to support and confirm its demands in the South China Sea; among these forms are the following:

1- China constantly affirms that it is committed to peaceful settlement of the South China Sea question through negotiations and consultations, and that it is committed to preserving peace and stability in the region. Nevertheless, China always calls for and favours conducting bilateral talks with the parties to the conflict instead of multilateral talks. China also often indicates its eagerness to conduct negotiations without holding actual talks, which supports and confirms the stalling strategy it follows.

2- China responds - routinely - to the demands and rights of other countries, and usually responds to them in the form of a statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but at the same time it affirms that the Chinese government shoulders the responsibility to maintain sovereignty and maritime rights in the appropriate way.

3- China used diplomacy to prevent commercial activity in the disputed waters, as it consistently asserted that any unilateral action by other countries is a violation of sovereign rights and judicial authority and is considered an illegal and invalid act (Fravel, 2011: 300).

III-2-2 The Administrative method

China used the administrative method to enhance efforts aimed at exercising jurisdiction over the waters to which it claims its rights, and that was through the development of the activities of maritime law enforcement agencies, and these efforts came - mostly - as a result of the increase in commercial activity of other claimants, especially in areas of fishing and hydrocarbon resources. Regarding fishing operations and areas, China has in the last decade strengthened its capabilities and ability to monitor fishing operations in the disputed areas, and the main party that pledged to undertake this task is the Fisheries Management Office located in southern China. As for the development projects of hydrocarbon resources, China has used a similar dynamic to assert its control over commercial activity in the disputed waters, and this dynamic guarantee intercepting and preventing the activities of foreign oil companies in these waters (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 29 August 2017).

III-2-3 The Military method

The military tool played an indirect role in China's policy towards the South China Sea conflict, and China has demonstrated and displayed its modernized maritime capabilities through patrol ships and training exercises, in order to support its claims in the disputed waters, enhance its ability to defend them, and prevent other claimants from challenging it. The first step taken by the Chinese military forces in supporting and affirming China's demands is reinforcing the People's Liberation Army Navy, especially the South Sea Fleet, which includes the South China Sea in the scope of its operations. China has increased the size and capabilities of its naval forces, as well as introducing a steady increase in the Coast Guard forces. And, over the past two years, China has produced additional new naval ships, a new class of destroyers and submarines, as well as anti-ship missiles, and other advanced and modern weapons, which prompted other claimants - especially Vietnam and the Philippines - to strengthen their naval capabilities, and their military bases in the occupied islands, but despite this, the capabilities of these claimants lag far behind China in terms of strength and ability (Project 2049 Institute, 12 May 2015).

Besides all the above, China began constructing a group of artificial islands, which formed an extension of the Spratly Islands in June 2014, and it also undertook land reclamation operations in these disputed islands in the South China Sea, as it

announced in June 2015 the start of this work. Since then, China has built port facilities, military buildings, airfields and runways on these islands. The speed and scale of the establishment of these facilities raised the concerns of countries that have interests in the region, especially the United States, as such facilities reinforce China's footholds in the islands in the South China Sea, and support its demands, and these operations may push China to establish an air defence zone in the South China Sea alike in 2013 in the East China Sea. Also, China's refusal to negotiate on these regional issues confirms China's intention to spare no effort to preserve these lands, which it basically claims to own, which is attested by China's rejection of any attempts to submit the case to an international court for adjudication (CSIS, 8 April 2015).

Although the other claimants have carried out some construction work on the occupied islands, the actions and measures taken by China are the ones that represent a source of great concern for the United States, as President Barack Obama referred to US concerns about China's backfilling and militarization operations in the disputed areas, which makes it difficult to reach a peaceful settlement between countries in the region, in addition to the fact that these operations threaten freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The biggest source of concern for the United States and its allies consists in the fact that the construction and land reclamation operations may allow China to project its military force away from its territories, and build military assets on these lands, which may enhance China's position and status in the South China Sea. In addition, these reclaimed lands may allow China to conduct regular and continuous maritime patrols, and China's recent efforts in developing its military capabilities fuel this concern.

Although the size of these islands is limited, they are large and equipped enough to exert strong pressure from China on other claimants, and specifically the ability of warships to reach the Spratly Islands, will allow China to continue and strengthen the encirclement strategy, which is a policy consisting in surrounding the disputed area by a group of fishing boats, then Coast Guard and Maritime Surveillance vessels, as well as warships until the area is completely encircled and controlled, and this is what happened in 2012 when Chinese coast guard ships encircled the Philippine Coast Guard vessels in the "Scarborough Shoal" rock until China has controlled this region, and thus the operations and measures that China is carrying out in the South China Sea will give China a greater ability to carry out similar encirclements on a larger scale, and to control more disputed areas (China Real Time, 10 April 2015).

That is why the United States strongly opposes the backfilling and construction work carried out by China in the South China Sea islands, stressing that this matter is illegal and leads to the region's destabilization. China responded that the construction works are entirely situated within the areas of Chinese sovereignty, and that their main purpose is fulfilling China's international responsibilities, assisting in carrying out

search and rescue activities, monitoring meteorology, preserving the environment and safety of navigation, and not targeting any country or hindering other countries' freedom of navigation and aviation (The Wall Street Journal, 8 March 2015).

China also indicated that the conflicts and differences existing between the countries of the region are a regional matter, and that the countries concerned are able to find solutions to them away from any external interference, stressing that the US intervention in the question is a dangerous provocation at the political and military levels, and that it is a clear attempt to escalate the situation and militarize the region. We conclude from the foregoing that China's approach in the South China Sea is a coercive approach, which proved to be effective to a large extent, and mainly depends on taking small, gradual steps that are not likely to provoke any military response by any of the other claimant countries, but the status quo changes gradually with time in its favour with regard to the disputed demands, and the important feature of the Chinese approach is to avoid -cautiously - direct involvement of the naval forces of the People's Liberation Army. As for the countries of Southeast Asia (ASEAN) they have expressed their strong disappointment with the Chinese provocative unilateral acts, and the shift of its policy from soft to hard. Also, some analysts have indicated that China has been adopting aggressive and offensive policies to support its claims in the South China Sea (Yamaguchi, 2016: 30-31).

Based on the above, we suggest that China's behaviour in the South China Sea is deliberate and organized, and that its recent actions indicate the existence of coordination and harmony between its political, economic and military objectives, and that they have wide regional and global repercussions. Such actions are enhanced and encouraged by the lack of sufficient pressure by the ASEAN countries, and the lack of a mechanism of implementation in both the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea; China is thus able to continue in these acts without any penalty.

In short, China suggests two options, namely: that the countries directly engaging in actions and challenging the Chinese demands will be confronted with manifestations of Chinese power in all its forms, but if the countries seek to adjust their policy with China or actually yield to the Chinese demands, then they will reap great economic and political benefits, especially since China realizes that these countries have an increasingly interrelated economy with China (Tkacik, 2018: 336).

Therefore, China's policy of assertion and insistence in the South China Sea will have far-reaching consequences for regional stability and conflict resolution in the future, and instead of China following the short-term political stance based on response and reaction, its current actions represent a purposeful and primitive policy to support China's demands, and prevent other countries from asserting and reinforcing their demands. It is clear that China's policy is a long-term one and is unlikely to change in

the short term, and it will put more obstacles before any settlement or compromise solutions to the conflict, and it should be noted that despite its affirmative and assertive approach, China does not want to allow the South China Sea issue to dominate and overshadow its relationship with the ASEAN countries and other countries, especially the United States, despite the fact that China's policy of persistence and assertion will add new doubts regarding the existing tension in the South China Sea and its impact on the region as a whole.

In fact, China's position with regard to the conflict in the South China Sea is based on a strategic vision, i.e. that China aims to achieve a major objective, namely full control of the South China Sea with a view to consolidating its strategic and economic stature in the Asia-Pacific region, in pursuit of hegemony and influence over the entire region, and competing with the United States in regional supremacy, particularly after the United States directed its attention and focus towards the Asia-Pacific region to promote and protect its interests there (Sinaga, 2015: 135).

IV The American factor in the South China Sea conflict

The South China Sea is one of the important spaces for the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, and although the United States is not a direct party to the conflict, and does not claim sovereignty over any of the disputed areas, it is deeply interested in how to manage existing disputes in the South China Sea. This is due to several main reasons, namely that the South China Sea is part of a major transit route for maritime trade traffic to and from East Asia, and a vital transit route for the US Navy. Also, the existing conflicts between China and some Southeast Asian countries -some of whom are considered US allies- may generate tensions and conflicts that lead to undermine the region's stability and security. In addition, China can use its mounting power to create a sphere of influence that harms and threatens the interests of the United States in Asia (Carnegie: Endowment for International Peace, 23 July 2015).

Consequently, these previous factors highlight the extent of US interest in the events taking place in the South China Sea, the policies aimed at ensuring maritime security and freedom of navigation, and support for the peaceful and legal management of existing disputes. Moreover, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is one of the biggest disputed issues between the United States and China, especially in the two hundred nautical miles of China's exclusive economic zone. Given the importance of the Asian region and US-China relations for the United States, so it has an important interest in preventing any party from militarily escalating conflicts in the South China Sea, including preventing the outbreak of military incidents between US and Chinese forces in this region (Tkacik, 2020: 74).

It is worth mentioning in this context that many analysts in the United States believe that China participates in a coordinated strategic effort to control the entire

South China Sea, as part of a larger attempt to push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region and replace it as a dominant power in the region. Therefore, these analysts consider that the continued stationing of US military forces in the region in order to deter China and its ambitions, will prevent such an outcome from occurring, and will also help to maintain stability and security in this region (WILEY, 26 May 2018).

Accordingly, in order to understand the policy adopted by the United States vis-à-vis the South China Sea conflict, it is necessary to first refer to the interests of the United States in this sea.

IV-1 The United States' interests in the South China Sea

The United States has many important interests in the South China Sea that it seeks to protect and preserve, mainly:

1- Freedom of navigation and unimpeded access to the waters of the South China Sea are among the main and crucial interests of the United States, from its point of view all countries enjoy freedoms on the high seas, including freedom of navigation beyond the legally established territorial waters of any coastal state, and both commercial and military vessels enjoy these freedoms in accordance with Articles 56 and 87 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Therefore, the United States government seeks to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which includes an unimpeded legal trade exchange, and the exercise of the freedoms of the seas associated with the conduct of non-hostile military activities within the exclusive economic zone, which extends for a distance of 200 nautical miles beyond the territorial waters, and to this end, the United States has taken many measures to affirm these freedoms in the Malaysian, Vietnamese and Chinese waters since 2007.

Unimpeded access to the waters of the South China Sea is important for the United States for two main reasons: The first reason is to lay down and support the foundations of the economic dynamism of the region, which is based on large-scale inter-trade and international trade. Every year, about five trillion dollars of trade pass through these waters, of which more than one trillion dollars belong to US trade, and in the event of any crisis, cargo ships will be diverted to other routes that will harm regional and international economies, including the American one, as a result of the rise in insurance rates and the length of the transit line. The second reason consists in the ability of the United States to exhibit its military power not only in East Asia, but throughout the world, as many US Navy ships pass from the West Coast as well as from Japan through the South China Sea heading to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf. It is worth noting that the United States' adherence to the principle of freedom of

navigation in the South China Sea is part of its policy of adherence to this principle worldwide (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, March 2014).

The main issue for the United States is China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states in the exclusive economic zone. There is a clear difference between the United States and China over military activities in China's exclusive economic zone, as China insists that it has the legal right - under the applicable statute in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea - in denying foreign naval forces a range of activities, including military surveillance and surveys, as they are considered as hostile activities, and stresses that carrying out such activities without prior notification or permission from the coastal state is a violation of Chinese domestic law and international law (Alenezi, 2020: 188).

On the other hand, the United States rejects this interpretation, stressing that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea allows states to exercise freedoms of the high seas in the exclusive economic zones of coastal states, and affirms that there is nothing that negates the right of states to conduct peaceful military activities in the exclusive economic zones without prior notice or obtaining consent of coastal states. The United States also notes that China itself has conducted such activities in the United States' EEZs around Hawaii and Guam. In addition, China's development of its naval military capacity reinforces this difference and casts doubt on China's position on freedom of navigation. China's recent steps in developing its military power - especially the navy - are interpreted by some as evidence of China's hidden intentions to obstruct freedom of navigation, especially in cases of emergency (Scott, 2018: 9).

In general, the dispute between the United States and China over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea led to the occurrence of three serious accidents in the waters of this sea, namely:

- An accident in 2009, when Chinese fishermen and paramilitary ships intercepted a US Navy surveillance ship.
- An air collision in 2011 between an American reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter plane.
- Skirmishes in 2014 between a Chinese fighter and US patrol aircraft.

2- Maintaining regional security and stability in East Asia is one of the key national interests of the United States. As with freedom of navigation, regional peace and stability maintain prosperity in both East Asia and the United States. Intensive conflict and competition prevents the development of important and scarce resources, limits cross-border trade and investments, and threatens the security of sea lanes in the region. Regional stability faces several threats emanating from the conflict in the South China Sea, the first threat is the possibility of the outbreak of armed conflict between the conflicting parties in this sea; China and Vietnam clashed twice previously, the first in 1974 on the Paracel Islands, and the second in 1988 to gain control of Johnson Island,

and the second threat is the use of coercive measures repeatedly and increasingly to support and confirm the state's demands, such as China's threats to foreign oil companies, including American ones; this matter increases instability and lack of security in the region.

The third and final threat is represented in China's continuous upgrade of its naval military capabilities, which has prompted other countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, to follow in its footsteps. This increases the chances of an arms race in the region, and thus destabilizing regional peace and stability. It is worth noting that the US allies, who are considered direct parties to the South China Sea conflict, are turning to the United States as a basic guarantor for maintaining security and stability in the region through the American military presence. In addition, these steps by China and the United States in the South China Sea constitute a source of instability and undermine peace in the region, as the US military has recently set a plan to respond to China's new capabilities which would guarantee for the United States access to the waters of the South China Sea in times of war (Kapur, 2020: 3).

3- The United States has a great interest in resolving the South China Sea disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law. The United States affirms that the unjustified use of force is a clear violation of the United Nations Charter that prohibits such behaviour, and that any attempt by the claimants, especially on the part of China to threat or use force to control the disputed areas without any clear justification, would lead to regional instability and creating a strong regional and international response. China - specifically - must realize that such an outcome will totally undermine the policy of peaceful development, and will imperil its relations with other countries, especially the countries of the region.

In addition to the previous interests of the United States, it has other interests related to the existing conflicts in the South China Sea, mainly: preserving its commitments and its credibility before its allies in the region, as the failure of the United States to achieve this will harm and undermine US security guarantees in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, especially with Japan and South Korea. At the same time, the United States is trying not to get involved in these disputes, especially with China. It is also in the interest of the United States to maintain stable and cooperative relations with China (Fravel, 2014: 3).

IV-2 US policy towards the South China Sea conflict

International law is the focal point of US policy towards sovereignty disputes and related issues in the South China Sea. Over the past few years, official statements issued by the United States have focused on the need for parties in conflict to follow the rules and laws established by international law (CAN, November 2014). The policy of the United States regarding this conflict is clear and consistent. A number of

statements and declarations issued by Secretary of State "John Kerry" and Secretary of State "Hillary Clinton" played a major role in establishing the basic political framework for the United States, and they indicated in these statements that the United States has a national interest in maintaining peace and stability, respect international law, unimpeded trade exchange, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. They also indicated that the United States does not take a specific position regarding conflicting regional demands related to the islands and the surrounding waters, but it has a strong interest in the manner and method through which conflicts are managed in the South China Sea, in order to ensure stability in this vital region.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' policy towards the South China Sea disputes was largely reactive, but the United States changed - afterwards - the content and form of its policy in response to the events in the South China Sea, which began threatening the US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States took its first public stance on the South China Sea disputes after the Chinese occupation of the Mischief Reef in 1994, as concerns about security and stability in the region increased, and this policy was - in general - broad, as the United States issued in May 1995 a public policy statement by the State Department Spokesperson at the time. This statement emphasized the peaceful solution of disputes, avoiding the use of force or threatening to use it to control the disputed areas, as well as maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea (Fravel, 2014: 3).

With this flexible policy, the United States guaranteed the ability to change its position when its security interests get affected, and since then the United States has been monitoring the situation closely, and its analysts began to promote the theory of the Chinese threat to the countries of the region, and the need for an intensive American presence to preserve the balance of power.

The United States began to expand and clarify its policy towards the South China Sea in 2010, in response to the escalation of tensions and disputes between the claimants starting 2007; during this period from 2007 to mid-2010, all conflicting parties - especially China - sought to firmly and decisively confirm and support their demands in the South China Sea, and at times some of them took a set of coercive measures to establish and defend their demands, which led to the escalation of existing tensions. Most of these measures were taken by China, as it detained, for example, hundreds of Vietnamese fishermen working in the waters close to Paracel Islands, in addition to its efforts to obstruct the surveillance and reconnaissance operations carried out by US naval vessels in the South China Sea. It also increased the frequency and scope of Chinese naval manoeuvres in the South China Sea. In addition, other claimants, especially Vietnam and Malaysia, submitted requests to extend their continental shelves to the competent United Nations body, and conducted symbolic

visits to the Spratly Islands, as well as clashes between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels (Fravel, 2014: 4).

Therefore, the United States began to pay further attention to the South China Sea, particularly because of China's conduct towards it with regard to American oil companies and surveillance activities and military surveys in the South China Sea, as this represented for the first time a direct threat to US interests in the region, so the US administration decided to elaborate a new and comprehensive formula for its policy vis-à-vis the South China Sea disputes.

It is worth noting that this has directly involved and implicated the United States in the South China Sea disputes in a strategic rather than tactical manner. China was also angry at the US administration's comments, given that China had succeeded in the previous period in keeping the issue of sovereignty away from the agenda of the ASEAN Regional Forum and other multinational Asian meetings agendas. Therefore, Chinese officials condemned the US efforts to internationalize the issue, and its interference in the ongoing conflict in the South China Sea (Weissmann, 2019: 229). It is evident from the above that the US policy has achieved two main goals. The first objective was that the United States has reminded all parties, especially China, that it intended to remain an important strategic party in East Asia, and that peace and stability in the South China Sea is one of the US vital interests. The second goal was to add political signs revealing the new US Asia-oriented strategy.

General, since the end of 2010, the United States has emphasized, through diplomacy and the increase of its military presence, that it considers the establishment of stability based on laws and rules in the South China Sea an important national objective for the United States, and although the United States has remained neutral regarding regional demands, this was not the case concerning the extent of legitimacy of the demands and assertive conduct. The United States has also become more involved and implicated in the security dynamic between China and the countries bordering the South China Sea (McDevitt, 2013: 177).

In February 2014, the United States issued a statement detailing its policy towards the South China Sea, and this statement was not just a response to the events taking place in this region, but rather the result of the discussions that took place in the US Congress about the United States' policy to rebalance towards Asia and the Pacific, and to emphasize its importance, which has been remarked already in subsequent years. All of the above shows that China's conduct and measures in the past few years reflect its increasing desire and efforts to extend its control over the disputed areas in the South China Sea. What helps and encourages it to do so is its growing naval military capacity. Therefore, the United States constantly emphasizes all the previous elements included in its official statements, including referring to China as the claimant most instigating of tension and instability in the region. The US also stresses the importance of

submitting the case to an international court for adjudication - as requested by the Philippines - considering that this is the best means to peacefully solve the South China Sea disputes (Washington. DC, 5 February 2014).

Based on the above, there are three main cases in which armed clashes may occur in the South China Sea, and it is likely that the United States will push to use force. The first and most likely and dangerous case is the occurrence of an armed clash between the Chinese and US navies as a result of the military operations carried out by the United States in China's exclusive economic zone. These operations are one of the main reasons for stirring Chinese armed response; as we mentioned earlier, China opposes any US military activities in its exclusive economic zone, while the United States believes that any country has the right to engage in peaceful military activities in the exclusive economic zones of coastal states, and given such difference, China constantly intercepts and stops US reconnaissance vessels and aircraft approaching its exclusive economic zone, and does so in aggressive ways and methods, which may increase the risk of military accidents and clashes (Mehboob, 2018: 217).

Moreover, the large growth in the number of Chinese submarines also increases the risk of accidents in this region, similar to what happened in 2009 when a Chinese submarine collided with a US destroyer. Thus, we argue that misunderstanding and misjudgment may lead to further military escalation, accelerate the occurrence of a major political crisis, and may increase the intensity of the strategic competition between the United States and China, and a decrease in the level of confidence between them, which may lead to an increase in the difficulty and complexity of crisis management in the South China Sea.

As for the second case, it is represented in the ongoing conflict between China and the Philippines over natural gas deposits, especially in the disputed area near the Reed Bank, where the Philippine oil survey vessels operating in this region are constantly harassed by Chinese ships, and this dispute is considered one of the cases that may result in an armed clash as it involves aggressive conduct by China to prevent and intercept any attempts for oil and natural gas exploration in this region. Concerning the United States, it may find itself involved in this Chinese-Philippine conflict because of the "mutual defence treaty" with the Philippines signed in 1951, which obliges the two countries to defend each other in the event of an attack from a third party. In addition, the recent enhancement of military and political relations between the United States and the Philippines increases the chances of the United States being involved in any conflict that may arise between China and the Philippines. Consequently, the United States could find itself in a difficult position in terms of its willingness to live up to pledge commitments, and to maintain its credibility described as a provider of security in East Asia (McDevitt, 2013: 176).

The third and final case is represented in the differences existing between China and Vietnam due to the oil and natural gas exploration operations in the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam. China constantly intercepts the Vietnamese seismic survey vessels operating in this region, but Vietnam insists and pledges to continue its efforts in this regard, and this may lead to an armed clash between China and Vietnam, and the US involvement in this conflict, given that Vietnam is one of its allies, and the most concerned country calling on the United States to be more firm and decisive with China regarding the South China Sea dispute.

Generally-speaking, it can be argued that the policy and statements of the United States regarding the South China Sea dispute have become with time more specific and less diplomatic, as it began to describe China's actions and conduct as authoritarian and destabilizing for the region, and instead of giving general advice, the US discourse became more specific in its comments about the rules and laws, especially the illegality of the "nine-dash line" that complicated and exacerbated the situation, and despite all of that, the US administration was severely criticized by both the right and the left wings, not because it was not violent enough with China, but because China ignored the US advice to follow the rules of international law, and ignored finding third-party arbitration to resolve disputes, because China believes that the national interest outweighs the adherence to the rules of international law (CRS Report, 18 March 2021).

This shows the extent of the complex and intertwined political challenge facing the United States, and the nature of its future role in the region, and although the US saw in this conflict an opportunity to clarify that it is still a powerful party in East Asia by communicating with ASEAN countries in an attempt to confront China's policies in the South China Sea, however, it has put itself in a strategic deadlock regarding the complex issues related to the South China Sea, and has endangered the US-China relations, for which it will be necessary to carefully assess this danger.

Accordingly, it is clear that the US policy towards the conflict in the South China Sea reflects its main goal of preserving American influence, achieving strategic balance and stability in the region, and preventing any power (China) from dominating this region so that its vital interests are not threatened. The United States aims - at the same time – to avoid any military confrontation with China or to turn the region into a quagmire of a cold war between them (Wirth, 2020: 37).

V Implications of the South China Sea conflict

The dispute over a certain territory does not usually concern the parties to the conflict only, but interest in it extends to the rest of the countries located in the region that includes the disputed territory. This is because the impact and consequences of this conflict extend at the level of the political environment of the region as a whole, and

that is why decision-makers in the countries of this region are interested in this conflict as one of the external effects on the national security of their countries and the ensuing repercussions at the regional level, regardless of whether this conflict imposes maintaining the status quo or changing it. The situation becomes more complex in the region if the disputed territory is of geostrategic importance, as it is the case in the South China Sea (Sakuwa, 2017: 320).

The situation in East Asia precisely due to the South China Sea dispute reflects the previous matter, as this situation confirms that it is not easy to limit the impact of the conflict over a certain region to just the parties to the conflict only. In virtue of the geostrategic importance of the South China Sea region, the impact of this conflict has extended to a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, especially East Asian countries which have vital interests that it seeks to protect by preserving the stability of that strategic region. The strategic importance of that region has been inferred through China's conduct and policies, in addition to the decisive actions towards this dispute by the United States which found itself involved in a regional conflict with China. (As we have explained earlier) (Kim, 2015: 107).

Indeed, the South China Sea conflict has affected all neighbouring countries and their relationship with each other to protect their interests, whether by getting involved in existing conflicts or those that may occur in the future. For example, relations between China and both Vietnam and the Philippines have been negatively affected. Meanwhile, the cooperative relations between the United States, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and Australia have increased and developed. This means that the long-standing conflicts over a certain region trigger long-term effects that shape the political environment of the area in which the disputed region is located, through their impact on internal politics and interstate relations rather than just causing a series of direct hostile reactions.

Also, the development of the South China Sea conflict may negatively affect relations between China and other Asian countries in the future, especially since there is an emerging strategic alliance between India, Japan, Australia and the United States (QUAD) (Amer, 2015: 618), in addition the alliance announced in the Indo-Pacific region called AUKUS between the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, seeking to parallel the Chinese rise, and to deter China from any attempts to expand further in the South China Sea or to adjust the situation by force in pursuit of its hegemony over the entire region. Although China seeks to improve its relations with the active regional powers, if it does not commit to maintaining peace and security in the South China Sea, it will not be able to bolster its relations with these powers (Trends Research and Advisory, 2021).

In addition, the South China Sea conflict also affects the internal policies of the countries of the region, as it pushes them to increase military expenditure, enhance

their military abilities, change their orientations, strengthen their relations with allies, and adopt more assertive policies. Thus, this reflects that the impacts of the South China Sea conflict extend to shaping the political environment that governs the policies and relations of the countries of the Asia-Pacific region (ORF, 23 September 2020).

VI Conclusion

Stemming from the purpose of the study, i.e. clarifying the impact of the conflict in the South China Sea on the political environment of the Asia-Pacific region, we found out that the conflict over this region not only affected the parties to the conflict alone, but also had impacts on the regional level as a whole and the nature of interactions between the countries of the region, being one of the external factors affecting the national security of these countries. That is why the countries of the region paid attention to geopolitical developments in the South China Sea, which affected their choices and the spaces available to them in the context of this security dilemma. The orientations and attitudes of the parties to the conflict have also led to an increase in the resilience of the surrounding countries and their orientation towards adopting hostile policies to protect their national security.

Therefore, the absence of a desire to find a solution and settlement to this conflict, with failure to reach an agreement between the countries in dispute over sovereignty over the South China Sea region, and the rush of the parties to the conflict and their deliberate intransigence, especially China, will complicate the existing security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific region, and will lead to a state of rivalry and hostility among the parties to the conflict in particular.

Consequently, the existence of some discussions and consultations between the parties to the conflict is considered the best solution at the present time in terms of the stalemate and the suspension of the processes of seeking a settlement and a solution, especially as these efforts may be fruitful in the long-term. It is possible to start with the less contentious issues in order to enhance joint cooperation between the countries of the region, such as scientific research, environmental protection and freedom of navigation, which are common interests for these states in conflict. In addition, the existence of a simple network of mandatory cooperation and the existence of effective agreements will ultimately lead to a network of political outcomes that are difficult to reverse due to the high cost of this. Also, this mandatory cooperative network may be an attempt to adapt China and accustom it to integrate into a regional context and a non-confrontational political environment in the long-term.

So we conclude that the increase in cooperative areas among the countries in conflict may reduce the intensity and urgency of sovereignty disputes over the South China Sea, and that such means may contribute to creating a pattern of cooperative management of the South China Sea region between countries, in a manner that

achieves with time a state of harmony and cooperative values between the countries of the entire region.

In conclusion, failure to achieve the foregoing will make the countries of the region continue seeking to achieve a kind of strategic balance through deriving their strength from regional powers in addition to external powers, topped by the United States, to parallel Chinese expansionism and confront Chinese ambitions. The United States will also work to enhance the capabilities of its allies in the region to enable them of pushing China towards adopting more consensual, flexible and more conciliatory regional policies for its regional opponents, and this indicates that the region will witness very huge strategic interactions (Aspen Institute Italia ,12 May 2021).

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