Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 9 · Number 3 · 2023 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Review article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2393426l
Received: 07.07.2023 · Revised: 03.10.2023 · Accepted:05.10.2023 · Published: 26.12.2023

EAST SEA POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE US-CHINA COMPETITION

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Abstract: *The East Sea has a vital position for maritime powers worldwide and is a crucial point of strategic competition for significant countries. Currently, the East Sea is where many fierce disputes over sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction occur between coastal countries because the views and interests of each side are far apart, and they need help finding a consensus on how to solve the problem. The US interests in the East Sea include diverse interests in freedom of navigation, economics, politics, military, and security. The article aims to systematically analyze and explain the US policy towards the East Sea issue since the US Administration announced the Pivot to Asia-Pacific strategy. The US foreign policy towards the East Sea has changed in the direction of increased US involvement in response to rising tensions over disputes, especially towards increased interests of China in this region. Although the United States does not take sides in sovereignty claims, it nevertheless increases its involvement in the issue, focusing on peaceful control of claims and resolving disputes through peaceful negotiation measures.*

Keywords: *US; China; Rivalry; Competition; East Sea; Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

The East Sea is a part of the Pacific Ocean, an area of about 3.5 million km2 with a biodiversity continental shelf and abundant aquatic resources. This area is considered a high-quality oil and gas reservoir. The East Sea has a critical geostrategic position, directly affecting the interests of coastal countries, the Asia-Pacific, and even the United States.

The East Sea is one of the critical geostrategic areas related to the interests of many countries inside and outside the region, where the military power of many countries is displayed and expanded competitively for strong influence between major powers, most notably the United States and China. Over the past decade, the rise of China has gradually changed the landscape and power relations in the Asia-Pacific region. The US also acknowledges China's assertive rise and finds a reasonable strategy to balance power with this country in the region. China's attempts in the East Sea have raised concerns for the United States. In particular, under the presidency of Joe Biden, the US named China as a strategic competitor in the National Security Strategy published in October 2022. The US-China strategic competition related to the East Sea comes from conflicts of interest.

For China, the East Sea is strategically, economically, and militarily crucial for expressing China's ambitions to expand its sphere of influence to the southern region. China considers the East Sea a vital interest and a "springboard" for its expansion abroad. The East Sea is a trade route that helps China develop a stable and prosperous economy.

In addition, if China can control the East Sea, China can expand its defensive space beyond its territory. To deal with new challenges in the East Sea, the United States has changed its thinking about the "sea power strategy" and set new goals for the US Navy. One of those goals is for the United States to focus on developing the strength of its Navy and consider it a pillar in maintaining the United States' leadership role in regions of the world. The US maritime security strategy also articulates significant goals, including protecting freedom of navigation, preventing conflict and coercion, and promoting compliance with international laws and norms (Cuong 2019). The East Sea policy of the Obama administration has shown that the US foreign policy in the East Sea focuses mainly on protecting the interests of the US and its allies; the US wants favorable development in the East Sea rather than an armed conflict occurring. The US seeks to maintain a balanced relationship with coastal countries in the region. However, US policy in the East Sea has changed more or less in two periods before and after the world financial crisis 2008 (Le 2012).

THE GEOSTRATEGIC VITAL OF THE EAST SEA FOR THE UNITED STATES

Maritime Benefits

The East Sea is the bridge between the Strait of Malacca and Southwest Asia and the Balintang Canal, between Bashi and the Taiwan Strait and Northeast Asia, and a strategic maritime route between the North Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The US considers the East Sea the most important trade route. This is an international water area for freedom of navigation, so the US believes that any threat to freedom of navigation through the East Sea could have significant impacts. To the regional economy, the economic growth and security of the United States depend on maintaining freedom of navigation with both merchant and military vessels (Ralph et al. 1998). Because of those significant interests, the US is increasingly showing more interest in developing disputes in the East Sea, peaceful dispute settlement in the two archipelagos of Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, and other regions of the East Sea. If there is a conflict, the US is ready to respond to maintain freedom of navigation in the East Sea area (Tien Phong 2022).

Benefits of Oil and Gas Energy Sources

Identified as one of the sea areas with the world's largest oil and gas reserves, the amount of oil in the East Sea becomes a large asset block that any country wants. In addition, according to experts, the East Sea also has frozen gas resources, which are considered valuable as substitutes for oil and gas in the future and are currently concentrated in the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa. With the United States struggling to deal with the severe consequences of the financial and economic crisis and the 2008 oil price crisis, oil, and gas are more important to the United States than ever, and this significant energy source from the East Sea will be the goal that the US is always aiming for.

Military Benefits

The East Sea was once an area for Japan to use as a base to attack Southeast Asian countries during World War II (Ba et al. in Truong Sa); Subic and Clark air bases of the Philippines and

Cam Ranh military port were used by the United States and the (former) Soviet Union to deploy forces and expand their influence in the region during the Cold War; There are straits with natural deep water levels in the world, favorable for the deployment of strategic nuclear submarines that can approach surprise attack targets. Therefore, all countries want a specific position in the East Sea to ensure national security and deal with other non-traditional security challenges. Dealing with traditional and non-traditional security challenges has always been one of the US national priorities. The East Sea is identified as an essential traffic route in the US defense system against piracy and terrorism, especially in the Strait of Malacca.

THE GEOSTRATEGIC ROLE OF THE EAST SEA FOR CHINA

The geostrategic significance of the East Sea for China can be seen as no different from the Greater Caribbean (including the Gulf of Mexico) for the United States in the late nineteenth century. Only when controlling the entire Caribbean Sea can the United States dominate the Western Hemisphere and dominate the power order in the Eastern Hemisphere. Similarly, China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere (Mearsheimer 2010). If China can dominate the East Sea, then China will have the opportunity to become the hegemon of the Western Pacific Ocean and reach out to the Indian Ocean (Lee 2002). Regarding China's geostrategic interests in the East Sea, four critical aspects can be seen: territory resources, transportation, security-defense, and cultural-historical aspects. About *territory and resources*: Survey studies and practical exploitation of resources in the East Sea show tremendous potential. China wants to occupy not only all the islands and reefs on the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos but also the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of countries under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. (UNCLOS 1982), these areas are more than 1,200 km from the nearest coast of China (Hainan Island).

Regarding *traffic*: While China's overland trade with other countries and continents faces many obstacles due to topography and security, especially the Southwest transport routes to access the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, Pakistan, and India, the international maritime routes on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean mainly pass through the East Sea with places such as the Strait of Malacca in the South East Sea and the area between the two Spratly Islands and the East Sea. The critical lines are the Paracels in the north-south direction to connect China with the world. Regarding *national defense and security*, China aimed at two core purposes.

The first is to prevent freedom of navigation by foreign warships, especially by adversaries, beyond the limit of 12 nautical miles from the baseline. The second is to open the way to the Blue Ocean (continental sea) for the Chinese Navy in the East China Sea under the control of the US and its allies. Japan and Taiwan have blocked reaching the Indian and Pacific Oceans of China. Only through the East Sea to the Blue Ocean will China be able to use surface or submarine warships to protect its core defense and security interests from other potential adversaries. Regarding *culture and history*, China looks to the East China Sea and the East Sea to "regain the face" of a great nation in the past (Minh 2022).

THE EAST SEA POSITION IN THE UNITED STATES'S STRATEGY POLICY

The US National Security Strategy 2010 affirms the fundamental security interests of the United States, including 1) defending the territory of the US, the American people, US allies, and interests of the US; 2) stabilizing the region and eliminating any dominant power or group of powers that would threaten or hinder the US opportunities or interests; 3) develop the region and promote free trade and open markets; 4) ensure a stable, secure and nuclear-free world; 5) promoting global values, such as good governance, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom; 6) ensuring freedom of navigation, a prerequisite for regional stability and the protection of the US interests (White House 2010). These benefits have always been maintained through the presidencies of the US.

The US foreign policy in the East Sea focuses mainly on protecting the interests of the US and its allies; the US wants favorable development in the East Sea rather than an armed conflict. The US wants to maintain a balanced relationship with coastal countries in the region. However, US policy on the East Sea has changed more or less in the two periods before and after the 2008 financial crisis.

So far, the East Sea has always been one of the top concerns in US foreign policy because of its core benefits. The position of President Joe Biden's administration in the East Sea is creating the defining diplomatic war in Asia over the next decade, a tug-of-war between the United States and China over a dominant role in the region.

The current East Sea policy of the US is reflected in the following four aspects:

First, the US does not agree with the threat or use of force to assert the national claim of any state in the territory of the East Sea and will consider such use an essential issue.

Second, the US commits to supporting its allies and is ready to help protect its national maritime sovereignty.

Third, the US supports the bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism and urges the peaceful resolution of the problems of the relevant states in a way that enhances peace, prosperity, and security in the region.

Fourth, the US has a strategic interest in maintaining the lines of communication in the area and considers it fundamental to disagree with any maritime claim beyond that permitted by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (White House 2022).

The US National Security Strategy of October 2022 affirms that the Indo-Pacific will be the focal point of 21st-century geopolitics. As an Indo-Pacific power, the US has a significant stake in realizing an open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, and resilient region.

The US is committed to supporting and protecting the freedom of the seas and building joint regional support for broad access to the East Sea—the path for nearly two-thirds of global maritime trade and 1/4 of international trade. The US affirms maintaining and developing the five regional treaty alliances and the closest partnerships to reinforce these commitments.

For ASEAN, the US continues to affirm cooperation. It seeks more profound relationships with Southeast Asian partners through expanding diplomatic, development, and economic engagement in the region, focusing on Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.

The US also affirms the collective consensus of the Quad (Quad group) and AUKUS (US - UK - Australia) groups, according to which these two groups will also play an essential role in solving regional challenges. Actively strengthen its collective strength by bringing together America's allies and partners - including by encouraging closer linkages between Indo-Pacific nations and Europe.

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In the National Security Strategy 2022, the US continued to affirm its commitments to the Indo-Pacific treaty allies Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. The US will continue to protect Japan under the two countries' mutual security treaty, including the Senkaku Islands.

Additionally, the US continues to pledge its support for the freedom of navigation and overflight and to protect fishing activities following international laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES OF THE US IN THE EAST SEA

Upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

In light of China's recent actions regarding the East Sea issue, the Biden administration upheld the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982), which considered China's claim to be "illegal", supporting Southeast Asian countries. The US allocated more than 5 billion USD to the "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" framework to increase the ability to respond to challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and improve its strategic relationship with China (Thanh 2021). China has demonstrated its ability to occupy and defend these waters against counterattacks. However, the US has always denied the legitimacy of its sovereignty claims to China. It assures the world, especially its allies, that China cannot fulfill those unreasonable claims, even using military means (Binh 2021).

Strengthening Relationships with Alliances and Partnerships

To create a balance with China, emerging strongly in Asia, the US continues strengthening its alliance and partnership with Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, deploying military forces to ensure regional security and strengthen the US position in the East Sea. Exercise "Super Garuda Shield" took place from August 1-14, 2022, with a large scale and scope superior to previous exercises in the context of tensions between the US and China. The US decision to upgrade security ties with Indonesia previously was a sign of a strategic shift in Washington's policy towards the region.

Under President Joe Biden, to continue to take advantage of this most essential and most significant country in Southeast Asia, in the "Super Garuda Shield" exercise plan, the Natuna Islands of Indonesia were chosen by the US as the venue for the event—the most crucial military exercise in the region between the US and its allies. The US and Indonesian militaries have held these activities since 2009. However, this exercise has an enormous scale in the region with 14 participating countries; the main content is for countries to coordinate activities to improve maritime communication, rescue, and flying exercises using temporary runways. This exercise differs from the drill of the same name in 2021, a sea island defense drill with subjects such as field training, aviation, and medical care, aiming for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Promoting the Formation of Multilateral Security Cooperation Mechanisms

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the most crucial security mechanism emerging in Asia, has recently attracted much international attention. The Quad between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia discussed measures for the US to prevent China from dominating the Indo-Pacific region. The 2021 summit is the first meeting and has the highest level of attendance in the Quad. Also, at this Conference, for the first time, the Quad issued a Joint Statement directly addressing the East Sea issue, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and maritime security. This is considered a significant step in gradually institutionalizing the Quad's goals. Moreover, the members of the Quad have also demonstrated their legal position in the East Sea more clearly by strengthening cooperation to improve maritime capacity for regional countries. Cooperation in capacity building is an area that Quartet members have been and will continue to maintain, with emphasis on cooperation with countries in the ASEAN region, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

In addition to establishing the Quad, the US-UK-Australia Trilateral Security Partnership Agreement (AUKUS) is also considered one of the prominent landmarks in the current US East Sea policy. AUKUS, including building nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs), transfers nuclear engine technology to Australia while providing infrastructure and support for mining created to ensure a favorable balance of power to enhance military deterrence, to strengthen security-military and diplomatic cooperation, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

AUKUS affirmed three issues: (1) Indo-Pacific continues to be the number one strategic and security priority of the US, surpassing the Middle East; (2) the birth of the first formal, multilateral military alliance in the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century has a multi-dimensional impact, shaping the new situation in the region according to the intentions of the Indo-Pacific region; (3) in essence, this is a new method of gathering US forces to deal with the rise of China, aiming to affirm the US hegemony role in the region.

Increasing Presence in Southeast Asia, Especially Attaching Importance to Relations with the ASEAN

Southeast Asia will play a key role in shaping the region's future, and the US's continued commitment to the region ensures US participation in this shaping process. Southeast Asia is significant to the peace and stability of all Asia-Pacific countries and the prosperity of the US economy.

President Joe Biden's administration attaches great importance to the Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, supports ASEAN's central role and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), promotes enhanced US-ASEAN cooperation, and fosters the cooperative relationship between ASEAN Member States and the countries of the Quad group to address the challenges posed. The US will closely coordinate to maintain the region's peace, security, and stability, including maritime security and safety in the East Sea. The United States continues to contribute to ASEAN's regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The United States actively supports ASEAN's efforts to negotiate a Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) with China under international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In the long term, the US still

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maintains the approach. It wants ASEAN to share the US strategic priorities in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the issue of containing China (Nham 2021).

However, in the opposite direction, the US still increased the deployment of military presence activities, demonstrating deterrence power and increasing the presence of essential areas in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific. We have used Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) as one of the ways to challenge excessive maritime claims. Notably, the FONOP trip on July 12, 2021, occurred on the fifth anniversary of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the East Sea issue (2016). During the FONOP voyage on September 8, 2021, the US Navy ship entered the 12-nautical-mile area of Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands, after China's (amended) Maritime Traffic Safety Law took effect. The US also deployed more warships and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in the region, stepped up the redeployment of forces, and established a new military base in Southeast Asia (Dinh 2022).

As for Vietnam, the US continues to maintain the Security-Defense Political Dialogue with Vietnam; strengthened the exchange of delegations and consultations on sensitive issues in the East Sea; proposed to increase the frequency of US military ships entering Vietnam, wanted Vietnam to join the Anti-Proliferation Initiative (SPI) and the Global Peacekeeping Initiative (GPOI) soon. Especially after ARF 17, the US still consistently affirms a favorable position for Vietnam and ASEAN on the East Sea issue.

CONCLUSION

The East Sea is becoming an issue of top concern to the US's current foreign policy. The United States shifted from being just an observer country, not a country coastal to the East Sea, nor a party to the sovereignty dispute in the East Sea, to officially participating in this issue and becoming one of the factors influencing the security situation in the East Sea.

Since the US Administration implemented the Pivot strategy to the Asia-Pacific region, US foreign policy towards the East Sea has changed toward increasing US involvement in response, increasing tensions over the disputes, especially in China's growing influence. US foreign policy in the East Sea focused mainly on protecting the interests of the US and its allies. The US approved favorable development in the East Sea and maintained balanced relations with coastal countries in the region. However, current US policy in the East Sea has changed somewhat in the two periods before and after the 2008 world financial crisis.

The US is increasingly concerned about freedom of navigation at sea and the need to protect the business activities of US energy companies and, more broadly, US economic interests. For the US, the East Sea is an essential link in the strategic adjustment from Europe-Atlantic to Asia-Pacific. As a maritime power geographically surrounded by two oceans, the United States is always interested in the role of the sea and maritime power in building, developing, and protecting national security. In the current context of globalization, the East Sea increasingly holds a vital position in the US's maritime strategy and maritime power because the East Sea continues to be one of the most important sea routes in the world, connecting Europe with Asia, the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean. In addition, the world balance of power is shifting from Europe to Asia, directly related to China's rise and growing influence in the region.

Thus, US interests in the East Sea include diverse interests in freedom of navigation, economics, politics, military, and security, which are unchanged. Southeast Asia and its sea routes could provide the United States with an easily accessible location south of the continent. With an increased military presence in Central Asia and a closer alliance with Japan on military and security issues in the East, Southeast Asia can help the US create a strategic belt from the West down to the South and to the East to protect the interests of the US and its allies here.

For the US, the East Sea is critical in any presidency; it must ensure peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation here. In addition, the US also needs to build an order based on international rules and cooperate with regional partners, especially ASEAN.

Although each US presidency may have a different approach to the East Sea situation based on a bilateral or multilateral system, in recent times, the US has still sought to connect more closely with countries in the region while enhancing military, economic, and security presence in the area to ensure US interests.

The US will continue cooperating with allies and partners in the region and the world to ensure freedom of navigation based on respect for international law. The US, whether it wants to or not, must still create space for cooperation with countries and partners in the region, and as such, it must continue to value ASEAN. Finally, the US will still pay special attention to the issue of respect and strict compliance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

So far, US policy on the East Sea issue has had a specific effect. Maritime security and the East Sea issue are regularly discussed at annual conferences, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. China and ASEAN have also begun to take steps towards agreement on a Code of Conduct. However, the East Sea has become a central issue in the US-China bilateral relationship. In that case, it will likely become a huge competition between the two countries regarding regional security.

CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Le Lan Anh: Conceptualization, methodology, writing - original draft preparation.
Nguyen Tuan Anh: Reviewing and editing.
Phan Thuy Linh: Supervision.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

Statement of Human Rights:
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any authors.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed Consent:
Not applicable.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Institute for Research and European Studies remains neutral concerning jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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