

# ASIA'S NEW GREAT GAME?

## THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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The power struggle between the British Empire and Russian Empire for influence in Central Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was afterwards coined as the Great Game. In this strategic rivalry, Afghanistan played a key role because the British feared that the Russians would use Afghanistan as a base for forthcoming invasions into the then British colony India. The recent statements of US and Asian policy-makers might suggest that a new Great Game is underway, this time in the area of the South China Sea.

The South China Sea (SCS) is the semi-enclosed sea from the south of China to the north of Indonesia and from the east of Malaysia to the west of the Philippines. The territorial demarcations are disputed for decades as are the questions of sovereignty over the islands and islets which are located within the SCS. Several claimants such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and China currently possess islets in the SCS and question each other's rights to do so. This situation has only marginally changed during the last twenty years, upgrading of military outposts on the islets being the notorious exception.

There are different reasons for the importance of these areas in the SCS, substantial fish stocks, existing and assumed energy resources (e.g., oil and gas resources) and highly frequented sea lanes are the main causes for interest.

The various fish stocks in the SCS build the economic basis for millions of fishermen in the littoral states, furthermore, the fish catch plays a pivotal part in the nutrition of the people living in this area. The demarcation of waters and the possession islets are important means to claim fishing rights in the area.

In the SCS are already various offshore oil extracting enterprises taking place, most of them near the coasts of China, Vietnam, and Malaysia. In the disputed area of the Spratly Islands are further oil reserves expected, thus the littoral states try to ensure their claims to participate in the subsequent exploitation of the oil fields.<sup>1</sup>

Last but not least, the SCS is one of the busiest routes of global merchant ships, roughly half of the annual trade shipping is passing through the bottleneck at the entrance to the SCS, the Strait of 



taking during 2005-2008 between Vietnam, China, and the Philippines seems to yield a point to its critics.<sup>5</sup>

China's growing assertiveness in the region is causing apprehensions among its smaller neighbours but also beyond the Southeast Asian region. The announcement of President Obama to deploy American forces to the Australian base Darwin is only the latest move of security developments in the region.

The smaller states of ASEAN are upgrading their armies, especially their navies and air forces for several years now, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the region has become a hot spot of global arms purchases.<sup>6</sup>

But besides the US, even India might feel tempted to engage in the area. The Indian oil company ONGC Videsh Limited is developing Vietnamese oil fields, exploration of the Lan Tay field started in 2003. Now, first reflections are underway whether the Indian navy should be prepared to protect Indian assets in the SCS.<sup>7</sup>

In an article for the 2011 November issue of the Foreign Policy, Secretary of State Clinton declared the beginning of America's Pacific Century. In a preannouncement of President Obama's attendance at the East Asia Summit she wrote: "Our focus on developing a more results-oriented agenda has been instrumental in efforts to address disputes in the South China Sea."<sup>8</sup>


This surely incurred Beijing's displeasure.

The following statements of President Obama at his Asia tour in November 2011 and the subsequent initiation of a military base in Darwin further illustrate the new American dedication to developments in the Southeast Asian region. The strategic importance and especially the sea lanes of the region are a vital interest of American foreign policy and it is to be seen how Beijing will react on this interference in its perceived regional affairs. In a response to newly US interest in the

region, China's Premier Wen Jiabao stated that the disputes should be resolved by "relevant sovereign states" and that "external forces should not use any excuse to interfere".<sup>9</sup>

Hence, are we attending the beginning of a new round of The Great Game in Asia, this time in the location of the SCS? As this text briefly surveyed, there are various interests at stake and several big and great powers involved, arguably too many for such a small area (especially, when concentrating on the bottleneck of the SCS, the Strait of Malacca). But by analyzing the motivations behind the big players' engagement (i.e., the United States, China, and India) there is reason to believe that a potentially tragic zero-sum Great Game is still avoidable.

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First, the US has not a real interest in permanently (and substantially) upgrading its military presence in the region. Given the still severing US budget situation and the persistent security situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, policy-makers in Washington are trying to reduce its forces deployed to foreign areas not to enlarge them by opening up a new theatre. Plus, the US is mainly interested in the security of the sea lanes and its guaranteed free passage, therefore President Obama's push on the littoral states to solve their SCS disputes. The US is not interested in confronting China directly but to put pressure on Beijing to be more conciliatory in case of the SCS disputes. The deployment of US Marines to Darwin is merely presenting the stick not using it (imagine 

Beijing's reactions to the US establishing a military base in Vietnam).

Beijing, on the other hand, will now take pains to somehow ease the situation in the SCS and to regain trust among its neighbours of the ASEAN. China has to accept that the US will now sit at the table of future rounds of territorial discussions and China no longer can use its relative power in bilateral negotiations with small ASEAN states. This is probably hard to swallow for Chinese policy-makers given their repeatedly stated premise that the SCS disputes shall be solely discussed among the regional states concerned. But in this changed situation, the continued refusal to accept multilateral discussions will provoke further military build-up and confrontation in the SCS.

Finally, India got only involved because of perceived Chinese assertiveness in the Indian Ocean. India's military build-up and assumed ambitions towards the SCS is a response to China's actions in what India perceives as its territorial waters. A reciprocal withdrawal will avoid future naval confrontations among the two Asian heavyweights.

In the past, China avoided to confront the US directly in upcoming controversies. This time, the conflict is located too close and strategically too important for Beijing to be simply ignored. The South China Sea will be the theatre of future trial of strength between the US and China, a struggle for diplomatic influence and economic cooperation in the first act. The US has played its performance well so far, it remains to be seen what China chooses as an adequate answer. A new Great Game in the South China Sea is still avoidable but it needs commitment not power play.

**Notes:**

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1. (Emmers, 2010)

2. (Erickson, 2009)  
 3. (Cerojano, 2010)  
 4. (Grammaticas, 2011)  
 5. (Lim, 2010) and  
 6. SIPRI (2010): New SIPRI data on international arms transfers reflect arms race concerns, online: <http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2010/100315armstransfers> (accessed on December 10, 2011)  
 7. (Gupta, 2011)  
 8. (Clinton, 2011)  
 9. (BBC, 2011)

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