

CHINA'S CURRENT NAVAL STRATEGY AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES: MARITIME SECURITY DILEMMA IN PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

While the Philippines and China declared 2012 and 2013 as years of friendly exchanges between the two countries, they are currently at odds with each other due to continuing sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. China's growing maritime capability, a result of the implementation of its current naval strategy, creates security anxieties in the Philippines. These security anxieties affect the present dynamics in Philippines-China relations. In the context of the South China Sea Disputes, the Philippines and China are now suffering a security dilemma, a tragic situation that creates enmity rather than amity in their relations. With their security dilemma, the Philippines and China are presently trapped in a "guessing game" situation, speculating on each other's strategic intention. Finding ways to ameliorate this security dilemma is essential for both countries to promote cooperation rather than competition in their overall relationship.

Keywords: *China's naval strategy, security dilemma, South China Sea dispute, Philippines-China relations*

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Since the 10th century, the Philippines and China have enjoyed very close, peaceful, and friendly relations. But the start of the 21st century puts their friendly relations in a very challenging situation because of existing differences on how to peacefully resolve their territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

During the official state visit of President Benigno Simeon Aquino III to China on 31 August 2011, both countries declared “2012-2013” as the “Philippines-China Years of Friendly Exchanges” (Banlaoi, 2012, pp. 175-177). However, the standoff in the Scarborough Shoal that started on 10 April 2012 and the continuing disagreements on how to peacefully solve the South China Sea problem prevented both countries from implementing their friendly exchanges. Instead, the two countries exchanged diplomatic protests and harsh media commentaries against each other, putting their bilateral relations in a very sour state during the whole year of 2012.

For 2013, there has been an attempt to renew friendly exchanges between the two countries by setting aside their sovereignty claims in order to de-escalate existing territorial conflicts in the South China Sea. However, China’s already grown maritime capability, resulting from the decisive implementation of its current naval strategy in the South China Sea, makes it utterly difficult for the Philippines to just sweep the South China Sea issue under the rug. The Philippines wants an immediate peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute because of its urgent need to develop the resources in its maritime domain for its national economic development.

For China, on the other hand, the South China Sea is also important for economic, political and strategic reasons. Security concerns in the South China Sea affect China’s core interests that define its foreign relations with other countries. Though China has a strong willingness to shelve sovereignty issues in the South China Sea, there is domestic pressure in China to use its present

naval power in order to protect the country's national interests in this disputed body of water.

This paper argues that the implementation of China's naval strategy in the South China Sea poses a maritime security dilemma in Philippines-China relations. Overcoming this maritime security dilemma is essential to improve the current state in their bilateral ties.

Security dilemma: A framework of analysis¹

Security dilemma is an excellent framework to analyze the present dynamics in Philippines-China security relations, particularly in the context of China's implementation of its naval strategy in the South China Sea. Security dilemma inevitably exists when military preparations of one state unnecessarily create an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another state as to whether those preparations are for "defensive" or "offensive" purposes (Wheeler & Booth, 1992).

With the general concept of security dilemma, the Philippines and China are inevitably trapped in a difficult "guessing game" situation where they desperately speculate on each other's strategic intention, whether it is benign or malign. States' perceptions of security dilemma create a great paradox where states arguably believe that their security requires the unintended insecurities of others (Snyder, 1985).

This very difficult situation undesirably occurs because of the anarchic nature of international system where there is the utter absence of an overarching central authority that can effectively regulate and even tame the behavior of self-seeking sovereign states whose preoccupation is self-preservation and survival.

In an anarchic international environment, states constantly compete with one another to protect their highly cherished sovereignty and to pursue their deeply valued national interests.² Though the state of anarchy can also encourage and motivate states

to cooperate by building international regimes or constructing international norms necessary for international stability, mutual suspicions arguably continue to define the reality of international politics.

These mutual suspicions create an “action-reaction” dynamics that breed more feelings of insecurities. No matter how states convince their neighbors that they are benign, mutual suspicions unleash a sinister perspective that a benign status can change to a malign situation. This undesirable malign condition creates enmity rather than amity between states.

Thus, security dilemma is a great tragedy because small armed conflicts or a full-scale war can possibly occur between and among states though none of them actually desire such an unintended tragic outcome (Butterfield, 1951). Because each state is mandated to pursue its own national interests, security uncertainties pervade in the relations among states. These uncertainties also create security anxieties that in turn exacerbate the security dilemma.

The principle of security dilemma can describe the present complex dynamics of Philippines-China relations in the South China Sea.³ The Philippines and China (as well as other claimants) are strongly driven by their desire to vigorously protect their territorial integrity and advance their national sovereignty in this highly contested body of water.

Because of conflicting claims that are motivated by sovereignty issues, claimants in the South China Sea continue to make unilateral moves that aim to strengthen their effective occupation of islands, islets, reefs, cays and shoals in the area. The Philippines and China are motivated to build and enhance their naval capability to protect their respective national security interests in the South China Sea.

China's naval strategy: Evolution and current status

China has an existing naval strategy that aims to regain its past glory as one of the world's pre-eminent sea powers. The White

Paper on China's Armed Forces published on 16 April 2013 vividly articulates China's strong desire to develop its blue water capabilities for purposes of "safeguarding its maritime security and maintaining its sovereignty over its territorial seas along with its maritime rights and interests." China's most updated defense white paper admits that the People's Liberation Army – Navy (PLAN) "has a total strength of 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets, namely, the Beihai Fleet, the Donghai Fleet and the Nanhai Fleet. Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades."

As early as the 15th century, in fact, China already possessed a naval force that was considered one of the most powerful in the world. Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) enriched China's naval tradition through his historic voyages.

China's current naval strategy aims to address its maritime security dilemma as a rapidly growing major power. Inspired by Admiral Zheng's maritime tradition, this strategy evolves from Mao Tse Tung's modern dictum, "*Power grows out of the barrel of the gun.*" This principle justifies the arming of China as part of the strengthening of its comprehensive national power.

While building its military capability amidst domestic security concerns and external security challenges, the development of China's naval strategy is also guided by the mantra of Deng Xiaoping who asserts, "*Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining low profile; and never claim leadership.*"

Based on Mao's and Deng's strategic legacies, China has crafted a "Blue Water Naval Strategy" that is evolutionary and visionary. This strategy was finalized in 1989 when Deng adopted a drastic change in foreign policy by opening China to the world. This naval strategy has a 50-year grand plan divided into three phases:

- **First phase 2000** - the PLA shall have acquired sea-control power within its coastal waters.

- Second phase 2010-2020 – the PLA shall have achieved a kind of sea-denial capability within its first island chain in the West Pacific.
- Third phase 2050 – China shall have become a naval power capable of making its presence felt globally (You, 2006).

China already accomplished the first phase of its naval capability plan with the establishment of China's South Sea Fleet covering the South China Sea as its area of responsibility. China also has the North Sea Fleet covering the Yellow Sea with competing maritime claims with South Korea and the East Sea Fleet covering the East China Sea with competing maritime claims with Japan.

China's three fleets



Source: India Strategic, October 2008.

The South Sea Fleet in the South China Sea accommodates most of the Chinese ships belonging to two major maritime flotillas (“China Maritime Surveillance”, 2012):

- The 7th Maritime Surveillance Flotilla composed of the following patrol ships:
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 71
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 72
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 73
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 74
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 75
- The 8th Maritime Surveillance Flotilla composed of the following patrol ships:
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 81
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 83
 - Zhong Guo Hai Jian 84

China also has the 9th Maritime Surveillance Flotilla stationed at the South Sea Fleet. The 9th Flotilla has the Type 052B, a multirole missile destroyer built by *Jiangnan Shipyard* for the PLAN (“Type 052B / Guangzhou Class,” n.d.). The destroyer is akin to the Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class destroyer being armed with two missile launchers that can carry a total of 48 missiles.

Complimenting the South Sea Fleet in Guangzhou is the Sanya Submarine Base in Hainan. This submarine base has a Jin-class (Type 094) nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine that China secretly launched in July 2004 but was publicly discovered via *Google Earth* in May 2007. The 2012 US Department of Defense Report on Chinese military and security developments said that this submarine already entered full active service by the PLA Navy.

China South Sea fleet



Source: PIC.CHINAMIL.COM.CHINA, 2013.

Sanya submarine base in Hainan



Source: Federation of American Scientists, 2008.

Source: Federation of American Scientists

China is currently implementing the Second Phase of its naval capability development. The PLA Navy is strengthening its submarine forces in order to achieve a kind of sea-denial capability within its first island chain in the West Pacific. China has acquired Kilo class submarines from Russia and has developed its Song class and Yuan class submarines.

China's submarine fleet



Source: China Daily, February 2013.

At present, China has at least 60 submarines of various classes with growing stealth and increasing firepower capabilities that can operate up to 1,000 nautical miles from its coast. If the current trend of its naval capability development continues, China will accomplish the objectives of the second phase even before 2020.

In fact, China already implemented some aspects of the third phase with the construction of its first aircraft carrier named

“Liaoning.” Lessons from World War II demonstrated the deterrent capability of aircraft carriers. China’s participation in the anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden was also a litmus test of its naval ability to operate globally. Thus, China can also accomplish the objective of the third phase ahead of schedule.

At the opening of the 18th National People’s Congress on 8 November 2012, past-President Hu Jintao declared China’s intention to become a maritime power. China’s current President Xi Jinping, also serving as the Chairman of the China’s Military Commission, is poised to pursue this maritime power ambition, particularly in the context of renewed security tensions in the South China Sea.

China’s aircraft carrier



Source: Xinhua.net, May 2012.

China's naval strategy and the South China Sea disputes⁴

China is vigorously implementing its current naval strategy that intends to increase its naval and maritime law enforcement capabilities. This strategy aims to protect its “maritime defense” (*haifang*) and “maritime rights and interests” (*haiyang quanyi* or *haiquan*) in the South China Sea and other waters in Asia (such as Senkaku/Diaoyu Island in the East China Sea in conflict with Japan and the Yellow Sea in conflict with South Korea). China regards these waters as part its maritime territory.

The PLA Navy has also flirted with the idea of a new type of naval campaign in the South China Sea that encourages “attacks against coral islands and reefs” (*dui shanhu dao jiao jingong zhanyi*). Naval experts say that this campaign scenario “appears to be tailored to the South China Sea disputes where China might consider attacking islands and reefs held by other claimants” (Saunder, Yung, Swane, & Nien-Dzu Yang, 2011, p. 50). It is not yet clear, however, whether this idea has been adopted as an official military campaign strategy of the PLA.

Chinese fishermen in the South China Sea and the Scarborough Shoal do more than fishing. These fishing activities are integral aspects of China's implementation of its naval strategy. Fishing expeditions “are civilian instruments of power that help stake out legal claims and establish national maritime rights” (Cronin, 2012, p. 2).

Thus, the Chinese government protects the fishermen to promote its concept of maritime rights and stake out its legal maritime claims. China's current behavior in the Scarborough Shoal is part of this overall power projection. According to a report:

Chinese officials are deliberately using civilian maritime law-enforcement vessels, rather than the People's Liberation Army Navy—to enforce China's maritime rights and fishing laws. Whereas China resorted to using warships over Mischief Reef territorial disputes in the 1990s, the recent assertiveness of China in these waters has been prosecuted largely with civilian instruments of power. (p. 3)

Maritime security dilemma in Philippines-China relations

The implementation of China's naval strategy in the South China Sea exacerbates the maritime security dilemma in Philippines-China relations. For the Philippines, the implementation of China's naval strategy in the South China Sea is offensive and threatening. Its deployment around the South China Sea of China Maritime Surveillance (CMS) vessels with maritime defense capabilities is flexing China's military muscles. For China, however, China's deployment of its CMS vessels in the South China Sea is an assertion of its sovereign right to patrol its territorial waters for defensive purposes. In fact, China accuses the Philippines for its "illegal occupation" of China's territories in the South China Sea.

Since the Philippine government does not have the maritime capability to match China's actions in the South China Sea, Manila resorted to international arbitration to peacefully settle its maritime disputes with Beijing. On 22 January 2013, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) brought the country's maritime claims in the South China Sea before the Arbitral Tribunal under Article 287 and Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The DFA also sent a note verbale to Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines, Ma Keking. The note verbale contained the 21-page notification and statement of claim it submitted for international arbitration. The salient points in the notification and statement of claim are the following:

1. The Philippines asserts that China's so-called nine-dash line claim, encompassing virtually the entire South China Sea/West Philippine Sea, is contrary to UNCLOS and thus unlawful.
2. Within the maritime area encompassed by the 9-dash line, China has also laid claim to, occupied, and built structures on certain submerged banks, reefs and low tide elevations that do not qualify as islands under UNCLOS but are parts of the Philippine continental shelf, or the international seabed. In addition, China has occupied certain small, uninhabitable coral projections that are barely above water at high tide, and which are "rocks" under Article 121 (3) of UNCLOS.
3. China has interfered with the Philippines' lawful exercise of its rights within its legitimate maritime zones, as well as to the aforementioned features and their surrounding waters.
4. The Philippines is conscious of China's declaration of 25 August 2006 under Article 298 of UNCLOS (on optional exceptions to the compulsory proceedings), and has avoided raising subjects or making claims that China has, by virtue of that declaration, excluded from arbitral jurisdiction.

Though the Philippines also has the intention of developing a "minimum credible defense force," taking international legal

measures is its immediate option to advance its outstanding maritime claims in the South China Sea.

China, however, prefers direct bilateral negotiations. Beijing rejects Manila's option to internationalize the South China Sea dispute. Meanwhile, Beijing continues to implement its maritime patrols in the disputed waters of the South China Sea to assert its sovereignty claims.

Conclusion

The Philippines and China are trapped in a maritime security dilemma in the South China Sea. Both countries' perceptions of security uncertainties drive their maritime security dilemma. This maritime security dilemma puts Philippines-China security relations in a situation of enmity rather than amity. At present, the relations between the two countries are sour. Their bilateral ties are at its lowest point.

But there is a way to overcome the maritime security dilemma. Most experts in international relations agree that the way out of the security dilemma is through peaceful and open communication. Though this is easier said than done, communication is essential to build confidence and trust amidst the uncertainties in the security environment.

If the Philippines and China can communicate effectively that their intentions are benign to each other, their maritime security dilemma in the South China Sea may be overcome. Thus, both countries have to exert their best efforts to open all possible channels of communication to ameliorate their dilemma.

The Philippines and China are friendly neighbors. Their long-standing friendship dates back to many centuries of peaceful co-existence and good neighborliness.

However, the complex territorial conflict in the South China Sea has affected the further blossoming of their friendship. The South China Sea conflict, punctuated by China's implementation of its naval strategy, exacerbates the two countries' maritime security dilemma.

The South China Sea dispute is just one aspect of Philippines-China relations. Both countries have to exert efforts to prevent the South China Sea dispute from affecting the over-all improvement of their comprehensive bilateral ties.

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¹ This framework is also used in Banlaoi's analysis of renewed tensions in the South China Sea. Banlaoi, R. C. (2010). Renewed tensions and continuing maritime security dilemma in the South China Sea. In T. T. Tran (Ed.), *The South China Sea: Cooperation for regional security and development* (pp. 143-159). Hanoi: Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

² For a concept of anarchy, see Art, R. C. & Jervis, R. (1996). *International politics: Enduring concepts and contemporary issues* (4th ed.). New York: Harper-Collins College Publishers.

³ For an earlier account of security dilemma in the South China Sea, see Collins, A. (2000). *The Security dilemmas of Southeast Asia* (pp. 133-172). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

⁴ This section is based in Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Position on the Scarborough Shoal” (Delivered at the public hearing of the Committee on Foreign Relations, the Philippine Senate, 2012, April 27).