

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Energy in the Waters: Understanding the Driver of China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

Victor Chukwugekwu Ebonine

Ph.D. Student, Department of Political Science,
University of Benin, Benin-City, Nigeria

Endurance Onojakaroma Edafewotu

Ph.D. Student, Department of Political science
University of Benin, Benin-City, Nigeria

Abstract:

This paper situates the rising tension in the South China Sea within the framework of geostrategic attraction. With proved and probable deposits of abundance of energy resources in the South China Sea, in this case, oil and natural gas, China's assertiveness in the region has grown unprecedentedly. Buoyed by relatively steady economic performance enhanced by rapid industrialization, shifting social class status that breeds more of middle class, effective transportation system and enlarging manufacturing base, China seeks to address vulnerability trap inherent in oil dependence from foreign countries as oil becomes a critical lubricant to all these sectors. Oil and natural gas deposits in the South China Sea, therefore, is at the centre of China's claims and assertiveness in the South China Sea as it seeks solutions to foreign oil dependence. As mixed reactions continue to greet China's mixed strategies — military, bilateralism and diplomacy in its engagement with other claimants and the United States, it is expected that China and other claimants should seek or continue to seek peaceful resolutions to the dispute which include but not limited to joint development of resources and adherence to Code of Conduct while the US accommodates China's interest without resorting to confrontation which comes with enormous destabilizing effect on the region.

Keywords: South China Sea, china, oil, energy resources, assertiveness, ASEAN

1. Introduction

Energy politics seems to be dominating global politics in recent times. This can be attributed to rising urbanization, industrialization, nationalism and quest to legitimize non-democratic regimes. As states industrialize, the risk for conflict as a result of energy competition heightens. As opined by Carceres (2014:24), 'energy is the essence of modern civilization, and as societies and economies around the globe grow faster, so too do their energy consumptions'. This perhaps explains China's assertive posture in the South China Sea.

South China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea that is contested among six states — The People Republic of China (PRC), Republic of China (ROC) also known as Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam and the Philippines over group of islands — Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Pratas Islands and Macclesfield Bank. Each of the contestants claims at least one or all of these islands; laying competing territorial as well as maritime rights claims and counter-claims on the basis of historic rights and occupation. The result has been devastating hostilities that ensue among the claimants. While the four South East Asian claimants (Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Philippines) have made applauding attempts to ensure peaceful resolution of the disputes through diplomatic means by referring dispute to either Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) or to International Tribunal (as in the case of the Philippines), China has never ceased in taking provocative steps that incite other claimants to react.

The most provocative step China has maintained is the frequent release of its Nine-dash Line claim which encapsulates all of the islands. China's claim as captured in its Nine-Dash line has not only fallen short of discernible substantiation, but also defies every means of comprehension with no legal basis even as it has failed in numerous occasions to explain what it means by the Nine-Dash Line. Instead, China, while relying on its new-found economic and military prominence, rhetorically favours bilateral negotiation with each of the claimants while practically deploying its military in the South China to deter any claimant that wishes to develop areas it believes fall squarely within its Exclusive Economic Zone as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) while also dredging and building artificial structures in total violation of the Declaration of Code of Conduct agreed with ASEAN claimants in ASEAN Summit in 2002.

China's actions and activities in the sea have further fuelled hostilities in the region as other claimants have individually resolved to bolster their military even as some have beckoned on the United States to assist them in matching the superior military power of China. The United States presence in the region, as expected, has not done enough to douse the tension given the rivalry between the two super powers. In fact, China regards the region as its 'exclusive' area in

which any activity from an intruder will be met with stiff resistance. Though, the United States, in apparent unwillingness to further escalate the hostility in the region, has maintained that the parties to the dispute resolve their differences through peaceful negotiations and in total recourse to the provisions of the UNCLOS, its desire to bolster its presence in the region under the guise of freedom of navigation as recognized in the UNCLOS is not covert. Interest defined in terms of power underlies global politics and defines interactions that exist between states.

If the above assertion is anything to go by, then what is China's interest in the South China Sea? Put in a proper context, what defines China's assertive activities in the South China Sea? The possible answer(s) to this question can be found in various scholarly works on South China Sea. While some scholars attribute the reason for China's assertiveness to its quest for dominance in global politics (Ebonine, 2017; Buszynski, 2012), others see natural and marine resources including fishes, oil and gas, geopolitics, nationalism, Taiwan's issue, legitimacy and security (Raditio, 2019; Carceres, 2014) as reasons fuelling China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Though, all these factors adduced as possible reasons for China's assertiveness in the South China Sea are correct, none gave a deep analysis of the place of energy security as one of the core objectives, if not the core objective, of China's narrative of stability. This paper intends to fill in this gap. The central thesis of this paper, therefore, rests on the fact that though energy drives China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, the drive should not only be interpreted from the context of domestic pressures such as industrialization and urbanization, but also from the prism of an intelligent move to arrest vulnerabilities and uncertainties inherent in global energy trade that would undermine global pre-eminence China presently enjoys. Energy here can be conceptualized as the sum total of categories such as hydro-carbon, oil, water, natural gas, wind power, solar power, coal and nuclear power. However, for the purpose of this paper, oil and gas will be considered for analysis given that they are embodied in the South China Sea and therefore, very important to China.

2. The South China Sea and Claims: A Conceptual Elucidation

The growing importance of ocean in contemporary times cannot be overstated. Classically, states viewed oceans from the prism of national security, hence, they deployed all the efforts needed to beef up, modernize and strengthen their naval powers. However, it may be interesting to note here that the traditional perspective of oceans as veritable sources of power with attendant deployment and modernization of countries' navies has not waned but has been expanded. This expansion proceeds from scientific discoveries that beside lands, waters harbour abundant natural resources which would not only ensure man's survival on earth but also increase states' powers in fungibility terms. Today, it has been discovered that oceans cover about three-quarters of the earth and about half of world's population lives within fifty miles off the coast (Borgerson, 2009). It is within this new-found dimension of oceans therefore, that the South China Sea dispute can be captured.

The complexity of South China Sea dispute is rooted in the discovery of geo-strategic and geopolitical value of the sea, heralding the congregation of major powers in what would likely erupt into another war if unmanaged. Before the cold war, South China Sea held no significant value to both the claimants and the global powers at the time (Till, 2007). It was technically seen as abandoned region with decreased conflict and hostility. The height of Cold War meant that global powers held sway to most of the islands in the Sea as a way of enhancing power projection and deterrence. In this period, there were hostilities among the global powers as each fought to hold what it perceived as its acquired territory (Salil, 2012). However, the end of cold war was synonymous with power vacuum in the region as the global powers retreated to their homelands. The roots of claims of historic rights and occupation by the claimants in the post-cold war era can be figured from this period.

Geographically, South China Sea is bounded in the west by Vietnam, on the east by the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, on the south by Indonesia and Malaysia, and on the north by China and Taiwan. It covers about 150,000 sq miles (Salil, 2012). It further engulfs Asian states into what is known as 'Sea Lines of Communication', linking Indian Ocean with Asian States by which ships from Indian Ocean either passes through Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait or the Sunda Strait and traverse the South China Sea in the direction of either the Taiwan Strait or the Luzon Strait (Beckman, 2013). Apart from states within the Asian region, the Sea is also important to the rest of the world as according to the words of KeyanZou (2021: 1), 'more than half of the world's merchant fleet capacity sails through the straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok, and the South China Sea. More than 10,000 vessels of greater than 10,000 dwt move southward through the South China Sea annually, with well over 8,000 proceeding in the opposite direction'. Therefore, the Sea has come to become a flashpoint for international dispute which has also captured the interest of the United States of America.

Basically, the dispute involves China, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam and Malaysia that are locked under territorial and maritime claims over islands: Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Macclesfield Bank and Pratas Islands. In the Spratlys, the conflict is between all the claimants. However, Malaysia and the Philippines claim certain islands and rocks, Brunei and China claim Louisa Reef and Vietnam, Taiwan and China claim the entire Spratlys (Zou, 2021). More than sixty of the geographic features are occupied by the claimants. Taiwan occupies Itu Aba, which is the largest island and the only one with a natural water source while the other twelve largest islands are occupied by either Vietnam or the Philippines. On the other hand, amidst mixed reports, it is claimed that forty-four features or forty-eight as claimed by other reports (see Buszynski, 2010; Beckman, 2013), are currently occupied with installations and structures by the claimants except

Brunei. Vietnam occupies twenty-five though some reports claim twenty-seven, the Philippines occupies eight, some reports claim nine, China occupies seven, some reports claim nine, Malaysia occupies three and Taiwan occupies one (Buszynski, 2010; Beckman, 2013). The Paracels are reported to consist of about thirty-five islets, shoals, sandbanks, and reefs with approximately 15,000 km² of ocean surface (Beckman, 2013). Just as Itu Aba is the largest island in the Spratlys,

so is Woody Island the largest in the Paracels, which is about the same size as thirteen islands in the Spratlys (Hancox, Prescott & Schofield, 1995). Essentially, the dispute over Paracels is basically between the Philippines and China.

The Pratas islands and Macclesfield Bank are both located at the North of South China Sea. Taiwan occupies the Pratas. The Macclesfield Bank has no islands. It contains large atolls that are submerged even at low tide. In addition, it is worth mentioning Scarborough Shoal in this part of the paper. Scarborough Shoal has in the past generated intense confrontation between China and the Philippines in 2012. The disputed island is contested between Taiwan, China and the Philippines. It contains large atolls that are surrounded by reef. However, most of those reefs are claimed to be either completely submerged or above water only at low tide, but it contains several small rocks which are above water at high tide (Beckman, 2013; Carpio, 2017).

The United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is an international regime governing maritime disputes while territorial disputes are governed by general principles of international law. Territorial disputes are conflicts on issues bordering on sovereignty over continental lands, islands, and rocks. Territorial disputes are strictly resolved through negotiations agreed by parties in the dispute or by voluntary submission to arbitration by a court or arbitral panel. One characteristic condition here is consent of the parties. Thus, no disputant state can forcefully drag another to arbitration without the consent of the latter except as contained under Article 36(2) of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) Statute, there is a prior acceptance of compulsory jurisdiction by parties or a prior treaty that requires that parties submit their territorial disputes to arbitration. However, it appears that none of these mentioned exceptions exists among the disputants of South China Sea. On the other hand, maritime disputes include overlapping maritime entitlements: Territorial Sea (Art. 15 UNCLOS), (Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ; Art. 74 UNCLOS) and Continental Shelf (Art.83 UNCLOS); and disputes arising from interpretation or application of UNCLOS. Further, as stipulated in UNCLOS, parties to maritime disputes can resolve their disputes by negotiations or in the event of failure for negotiation resort to compulsory arbitration. All the parties to the dispute are signatories to the provisions of UNCLOS.

All the claimants have severally reiterated their willingness to resolve their overlapping territorial and maritime claims by peaceful means. This was firmly shown in the 2002 Declaration of Code of Conduct at the ASEAN Summit in which all parties pledged to maintain the status quo and ensure restraints. Given that ASEAN countries profit from trade relations with China, ASEAN as a body is webbed in the whole scenario as it doesn't know whom to support, whether it is China or the ASEAN members. Moreover, China favours bilateral negotiations over third-party resolution possibly given that it is the most powerful among the claimants economically and militarily. Thus, though China preaches peaceful settlement of the disputes, its actions towards other claimants show clear intent of deployment of power at any slightest provocation.

3. China's Assertiveness: A Conceptual Discourse

The discourse on China's assertiveness has dominated the media, public space and scholarly theses. This in part, can be attributed to what many perceive as a shift from the common narrative from past and present Chinese leaders and diplomats as 'peaceful rise', 'going slow' or what international scholars and writers see as 'status quo diplomacy' that has spanned for more than thirty years (Johnston, 2013:7). To that extent, some have labelled China or its actions as 'new assertive' (e.g., Swaine, 2010). However, what seems to dominate global discourse on China's assertiveness is first, what definitional clarity can be given to the word 'assertive? Second, at what point can it be said that China has become assertive or newly assertive? Third, what China's actions or inactions can be classified as assertive or newly assertive and last, what factors shape China's assertiveness? Candidly, these four thematic questions divide scholars and discussants of China's foreign policy.

Johnston (2013) agrees that the confusion which lack of consensus on the exact definition of assertiveness leaves much to be desired. As he puts it, 'Today, there is still no consensus definition of 'assertive' in the international relations literature on which to draw' (Johnston, 2013:9). However, in spite of the confusion that bedevils the uniform conceptualization of the word 'assertive', some scholars have chosen to define it their own ways and tested the various variables associated with the definitions against some China's actions perceived to be assertive.

Some scholars conceptualize 'assertiveness' as a constructive activism in international life, yet others use it to describe imperialistic, nationalistic, or anti-normative behaviour (see Hurrell, 2010; Overhaus, 2005; Laurence, 2007). However, the definition that appears to divide scholars is the one given by Johnston. He conceptualizes China's 'assertiveness' as 'a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before' (Johnston, 2013:10). Jerden (2014) while acknowledging the foundational basis which Johnston's definition has provided in understanding China's assertiveness discourse, he, however, argues that it fails to provide a comprehensive basis upon which all actions taken by China these years could be based. Thus, Jerden defines China's assertiveness as 'the tendency to achieve goals and resolve common problems involving the United States and its allies and partners by confrontational, as opposed to diplomatic means' (Jerden, 2014:49). He acknowledges that the United States used in his definition could be substituted with any relevant global or regional hegemon. He therefore pictures China's assertiveness from the prism of militancy rather than diplomacy as argued by Johnston.

Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu (2013) in their reaction on the standpoint of Johnston argue that Johnston's conception of assertiveness is too narrow and thus, capable of underestimating the significance of China's new assertiveness on foreign policy. They instead rely on the definition found in the realm of psychology as standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights to state the perspective on assertiveness as a 'confident and direct way to defend one country's rights or claims' (Chen and Pu, 2013:177). To buttress their point, they divided assertiveness into three typologies —

offensive assertiveness (which entails the use of power by a great power to exert influence or coercion in pursuing its interest without provocation from other states); defensive assertiveness (that entails defensive posture of a great power without seeking to expand its interest even in the midst of growing power and influence) and constructive assertiveness (which entails solutions to both regional and global challenges by assuming a leadership role) (Chen and Pu, 2013:177). They conclusively argue that China's assertiveness should be figured from both defensive and constructive position and not from offensive perspective as postulated by offensive realists.

Another illuminating work on China's assertiveness is that of Turcsanyi (2018). In his chapter one of the book, he draws the conceptualization of Chinese assertiveness from the arguments of Chen and Pu (2013). He regards Chinese assertiveness as offensive and defines offensive assertiveness as 'the behaviour in which China actively pursues its interests and acts boldly towards achieving its goals, even if they contradict the interests and/or security of other countries' (Turcsanyi, 2018: 13). Moreover, he argues that 'only those policies of China which are considerably different, qualitatively or quantitatively, from those of other claimants' and 'policies which are different from preceding policies' (Turcsanyi, 2018: 13) should be regarded as assertive.

Scholars, apart from their disparate views on the proper conceptualization of assertiveness, especially as it relates to China, have also argued on the basis of the period of emergence of China's new assertiveness, the various assertive actions and whether those actions can be regarded as assertive from the context of variants of assertive classifications given by them.

Swaine (2010) views China's assertiveness from both Western and Chinese notions. Both climes agree that China is becoming assertive but while the West view it as anti-Western and brash, the Chinese see it as arising from China's quest to protect its core interest. In western view, China's increased assertiveness started in 2008 while the Chinese contends that it may have started as early as 2006. Moreover, the Chinese assert that China's assertiveness is as a result of the China's global position as a rising power and one which will do everything to protect its interests and ensures its survival (Swaine, 2010). As Swaine further argues, the chronology of China's assertiveness in Western views include Premier Wen Jiabao's criticism of US mismanagement of the economy, China's questioning of the role of the USD as the global reserve currency, increasing Chinese cyber-attacks and China's strong reactions to allegations of such attacks, China's more activist stance in international forums (the G20, for instance), China's strong resistance to pressures of RMB appreciation, China's obstructionist behaviour at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, China's resistance to the sanctions against Iran, China's supposedly humiliating treatment of President Obama during his trip to China in 2009, China's unusually assertive reaction to Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama, and China's selling of arms to Taiwan in late 2009 (Swaine, 2010). Additionally, according to Swaine, the reasons for China's assertiveness from the Western views include the growing Chinese confidence stemming from a change in global power distributions occasioned by China's quick recovery from global economic crisis in 2008, growing domestic nationalism and increasing domestic feeling of insecurity especially in some quarters in China (Swaine, 2010).

In another work, Swaine (2011a) identifies the phrase 'core interest' as a reason for growing China's assertiveness. He conceptualizes 'core interests' as 'areas which are non-negotiable for China and where China would act more rigidly, perhaps even militarily and without observing international legal principles' (Swaine, 2011a:2). Further, in his co-authored work with Fravel in 2011 and in addition to proffering definition of assertiveness, they see China's assertiveness as 'the behaviour and statements [of China] which appear to threaten U.S. and/or allied interests or otherwise challenge the status quo' (Swaine and Fravel, 2011:1). They also contend that China's assertiveness is more dominant in maritime periphery, particularly in South China Sea and East China Sea (Swaine and Fravel, 2011). Thus, Swaine (2011b) factors the role of PLA in the growing China's assertiveness around its maritime periphery.

Johnston (2013) on his part seeks to draw comparison between China's 'assertive meme' in the post-2010 prevalent in the media and scholarly works and previous China's actions in order to understand if post-2010 China's actions are in ways different from previous behaviour. Johnston, therefore peruses seven cases of late 2009 and throughout 2010 often regarded as China's Assertive behaviour—the Copenhagen summit on climate change, the Taiwan arms sales, the Dalai Lama's visit to the USA, China's mentioning of the South China Sea as its core interest, the responses to the US deployment of a carrier to the Yellow Sea in 2010, the Diaoyu/Senkaku trawler incident, and the Chinese reaction to the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. He finds that Beijing's dealing with these cases constitutes a mixture of a new assertiveness (the South China Sea), an old assertiveness with a twist (the Taiwan arms sales), a reduced assertiveness (the Dalai Lama visit), probably predictable responses to new shocks (the Diaoyu/Senkaku incident), a continuation of past policies in the face of a changed situation (Copenhagen, the Yeonpyeong shelling), and empirical inaccuracy (the SCS as a core interest). However, he concludes that one area China can be regarded as assertive is in South China and that can be attributed to the proactive actions of other claimants (Johnston, 2013).

The work of Scobell and Harold (2013) particularly focuses on the perception of China's assertiveness rather than the actions that constitute assertiveness. While acknowledging that China's assertiveness peaked in 2008, they distinguish two periodic waves — first wave (2008 -2009) and second wave (2010-2011). According to their discoveries, the first wave was heralded by a feeling of triumphalism initiated by a change in the distribution of power as result of quick overcoming of global crisis in 2008 and Beijing Olympics, made possible by America's accommodation of China's core interests and America's less commitment to East Asia. The second wave seemed blighted with a sense of insecurity as a result of US' pivot to Asia which was seen as threatening to China's core interest. In both waves, they identify nationalism, the party's willingness to heed to it and bureaucratic pluralism as drivers. Further, they opine that both internal and external factors drive China's change in foreign policy.

Jerden (2014) examines the seven behaviours of China as captured by Johnston and added additional five bringing it to eleven in relation to China's new assertiveness narrative. In his testing, he discovers that only Taiwan's arms sales out of other presumptive behaviours of China amounts to policy change. Further, the tests of other presumptive behaviours added by Jerden showed that China was not assertive as claimed. Stating the reason, the narrative of new assertiveness has become prominent among both Chinese and Western scholars, he opines that the postulations of theories of offensive realism and power transition detailing power politics between rising power and declining hegemonic power create a situation in which people 'believed [the narrative was correct] before they heard it' (Jerden, 2014:81).

HooTiang Boon (2017) on his part argues that the narrative of Chinese assertiveness should be viewed from what he called 'HHSS' (Hardening the Hard, Softening the Soft) strategy. This strategy is 'dual-pronged' (Boon, 2017:641) in which the first underlies China's hard strategy in areas it deems as its core interests while the second underlies soft strategy (cooperation and flexibility) of China in the areas that it deems important but of secondary value. He identifies China's application of 'hardening the hard' strategy in its territorial and maritime claims, especially in the South China Sea and East China Sea. The 'softening the soft' strategy is visible in the area of economic diplomacy where China has extended hands of cooperation with neighbours and outside names notably — 'One Belt, One Road' (1B1R), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and China-ASEAN relationship.

Aaron Friedberg (2015) directly states that against common narrative that China's actions have been reactive, China's actions, especially in its maritime areas, have been assertive even since 2009. He justifies his argument by detailing China's actions that fall into his narrative — internal debate in China about the abandoning of Deng's 'hiding and biding' strategy and replacing it with something bolder and more confident, the brash and triumphal tone in China's foreign policy pronouncements suggesting its increasing power, the stronger reactions to irritations in the US-China relations such as the Taiwan arms sales and the Dalai Lama visit, China's increasing and frequent displays of its military and its deployment of new weapons, and China's increased willingness to use threats of force in various domains, including water and air space (Friedberg 2015: 133–134). He, therefore, adopts the concept of 'reactive assertiveness' as used by Kleine-Ahlbrandt (2013) which asserts that China uses the actions of others as a justification for pushing back and changing things on ground.

Christensen (2011) agrees that China was more assertive in the first two years before the 2008 global crisis, softly abandoning its age-long narrative of non-interference to creative intervention in cases involving North Korea, Sudan, Iran and others. In addition, he argues that this new Chinese posture benefits China the more than the United States as the stability in the North Korean peninsula as well as the Middle East would ensure stable supply of its energy needs. The post-2008 global crisis saw a reactive and conservative China. This changed policy, according to Christensen, was counter-productive, damaging its relations with the US and most of its neighbours.

Michael Yahuda (2013) corroborates the argumentation of these previous mentioned scholars. He believes that China has become assertive presently and discusses the forces that drive the present assertiveness as —the sense of change in the balance of power, the expansion of national interests towards the maritime domain, the growth of military power, and the heightening of nationalist sentiments among both officials and the population.

From this reviewed literature, it is worthwhile to deduce the common argument by these scholars. First, it appears that there is a consensus on the existence of assertiveness in some of China's actions while differing on the behaviours that worth being regarded as assertive. Second, it appears that majority of the scholars agree that China's assertiveness could be regarded as reactive. Lastly, from the array of definitions on assertiveness or new assertiveness examined, power and interest are central. Thus, be it defensive, constructive, reactive or offensive, China will utilize power to pursue and safeguard its core interests and its deployment of that power would largely depend on its calculation of the relative power at the disposal of the other party. Thus, it is safe to say that how China deploys power to the US might be significantly different from how it deploys power when confronted by Brunei. In all, territorial and maritime interests dominate China's post-2008 global crisis as can be seen in South China Sea and East China Sea.

4. China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

South China Sea presents a litmus test on the narrative of China's assertiveness since at least 2008. Scholars have equally written extensively on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Assertiveness as a concept does not essentially entails physical application of force or action. Assertiveness can also be based on psychological interpretation of possible deployment of threat. In other words, when a weak state is made to react or act or not to react or act in a particular way (even when its core interest is threatened) based on its perception of the capacity of the strong state to wield power; the action of the strong state can be regarded as assertive. Thus, it makes sense here to construe China's assertiveness in South China Sea not only on the basis of its military and economic power, but also on the basis of issued warnings which claimants heeded on the basis of their psychological interpretation of the outcome if not heeded even when their core interests are threatened. If assertiveness is understood from this light, then it is worth highlighting ways in which China has displayed assertive posture in South China Sea. More so, though this paper concurs with the assertions from scholars that most of Chinese actions in the South China have been 'reactive', 'defensive' or even 'constructive' (see Fravel, 2011; Swaine and Fravel, 2011; Raditio, 2019), the magnitude and scope of it is quiet massive given that all the claimants lay overlapping and conflicting claims to some of or all the islands and can undertake any permanent action to maintain their sovereignty as one of the requirements in international law (Turcsanyi, 2018).

First, China displays assertive tendency through increased defense budget and military modernization. China's defense budget has increased steadily, benefiting from China's global economic performance. According to SIPRI (2019), cited in CSIS (2021), China's military expenditure is the second highest after the United States of America, exceeding the

combined defense budgets of its neighbours and those of Russia, India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in 2019. Similarly, given that reports on China's defense budget vary, Tian and Su in SIPRI estimated based on China's official defense budget as thus:

Years	Official National Defense Budget	Old SIPRI Estimate	New SIPRI Estimate	New SIPRI Estimate As a Share Of Old Estimate (%)	New SIPRI Estimate As a Share Of GDP (%)
2010	533.3	783.4	714.4	91	1.7
2011	602.8	891.5	809.5	91	1.7
2012	669.2	993.5	916.1	92	1.7
2013	741.1	1114	1017	91	1.7
2014	829.0	1233	1119	91	1.7
2015	908.8	1335	1224	92	1.8
2016	976.6	1438	1 320	92	1.7
2017	1044	1545	1 424	92	1.7
2018	1128	1676	1 538	92	1.7
2019	1213	183	1660	92	1.7

Table 1: Chinese Military Expenditure According to the Official Budget and the Old and New SIPRI Estimates, 2010–19 (Spending Figures in Billion Yuan at Current Prices)

Source: Tian and Su (2021)

From the table above, it could be seen that China's defense budget has been on the steady increase in spite of the global impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it has been variously argued that China's defense budget over the years is speculated to be way below its actual spending (Tian and Su, 2021). This comes within the realm of China's military modernization.

Chinese military modernization programme via-a-vis Chinese territorial and maritime interests rests on People's Liberation Army (PLAA), Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). Since 1990s, these arms of Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) have undergone profound modernization with two major events identified as heralding Chinese modernization mission.

The first event was the effect of Gulf war of 1991 (Chang, 2012; Garcia, 2019). The glaring supremacy of the United States and its allied forces over Sadaam Hussein's Iraqi forces stunned China. The ease of the U.S and its allies deployment of cruise missiles, infection of the enemy system with viruses, invasion of Iraqi's airspace with fighters and bombers (Garcia, 2019), the level of sophisticated coordination of allies command structure led by the United States, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and the swiftness of the attacks led the Chinese military to conclude that they were not prepared and sophisticated enough to engage in modern warfare, especially if it involves powerful countries like the United States (Shambaugh, 2004).

The second event was the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1996 (Chang, 2012; Garcia, 2019). China had been infuriated with the degree at which Taiwan undermined its government by going ahead with its first democratic elections. To dissuade the Taiwanese people from exercising their right of voting, China began firing off the coast of Taiwan. The United States responded by sending two aircraft carrier groups to the area (Garcia, 2019) and began conducting military exercises while monitoring China's actions. It was a cognitive existential fact that China would only confront the United States with improved weaponry if it had the intention of contending with the United States in the straits (Shambaugh, 2004).

These two events birthed Chinese 'military doctrines' — Active Defense, Local War under Conditions of Informatization, and People's War (Cordesman and Yarosh, 2012). 'Active Defense' is not only about defense strategy, but also a counterattacking and offensive strategy aimed at decimating the strength of a perceived enemy (Garcia, 2019: 48). The Local War under Conditions of Informatization guarantees that near-future wars will be fought along China's periphery with sophisticated and modern war technologies that are in tandem with 21st century technology system (Garcia, 2019: 48) and lastly, 'Peoples War' doctrine was undoubtedly the oldest of the three. A publication by the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* (cited in Garcia, 2019: 49) elaborates on the practice of this doctrine:

...within the battle zone, the financial potential, mechanical maintenance capability, loading and unloading transportation capability, medical first-aid ability, in addition to the quantity and quality of the population, would all constitute extremely direct influence towards the logistics, equipment technical support and personnel replenishment.

From the formulation of the doctrines going forward, China's military modernization and acquisitions have not fallen short of raising fears among Asian neighbours and the United States.

Based on the Annual Report to the Congress by the US Department of Defense (2020), the PLAN currently operates for nuclear powered-ballistic missiles, six nuclear-powered attack submarines and about fifty diesel-powered attack submarines. Further, the PLAN has taken inventory of 12 Russian-built Kilo Class SS Units, of which eight can launch advanced anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). During these years, China's shipyards have delivered 13 Song class SS units (Type 039) and 17 Yuan class diesel-electric air independent powered attack submarine (SSP) (Type 039A/B). Aside acquisition, PLAN has also constructed two Shang I class SSNs (Type 093), four Shang II class SSNs (Type 093A), and six Jin class SSBNs (Type 094), among others. The PLAN has also ventured into production of new guided-missile cruisers (CGs), guided-missile destroyers (DDGs) and corvettes (FFLs). For instance, by the end of 2019, the PRC had launched 23 Luyang

III DDGs—including 10 lengthened Luyang III MODs—with 13 of the 23 Luyang III DDGs operational with the PLAN. This is not to mention improved acquisition and construction of amphibious warships, aircraft carriers and others.

This move of modernization by China further fuels tension in the region. The consequence is retaliatory modernization running syndrome where other states increase their defense budget and military acquisitions to counter China's military threats. According to Wezeman (2019), military spending in South East Asia increased between 2009 and 2018 by 33 per cent in real terms from \$30.8 billion to \$41.0 billion in constant 2017 US dollars Wezeman (2019). This is significantly higher than the 5 per cent increase globally but lower than the total increase for the whole of Asia and Oceania over the same period, which was 46 per cent Wezeman (2019).

Similarly, arms acquisitions also increased. In the period 1999–2018, South East Asia accounted for 8.1 per cent of the global volume of imports of major arms (Wezeman, 2019). In the period 1999–2007, however, South East Asia accounted for only 5.8 per cent of the global total. Its share of global imports jumped to 10.0 per cent in the next decade (Wezeman, 2019). South East Asian states received more than two times the volume of major arms in the two five-year periods 2008–12 and 2013–17 than they received in the previous five-year periods 1998–2002 and 2003–2007 (Wezeman, 2019).

To be sure, China's objective of military modernization may not be entirely for the ASEAN states, but the trust and assurance that China would not deploy them at the slightest provocation is elusive. This can be interpreted as an assertive posture. Moreover, in a way to measure up with China, some claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam have beckoned on the US for assistance.

Second, China displays assertiveness through silence on some of its policies and actions leading to different interpretations and possible reactions from the other claimants (Fravel, 2011). This is truer when a critical assessment is made on China's Nine-Dash Line claims. On 7 May 2009, China, in stark reaction to a joint submission by Malaysia and Vietnam to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf released a *note verbale* which reads that:

China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese Government and is widely known by the international community.

In the same vein, following Philippine's protest against China's *note verbale* in 2011, China chose to add few more sentences in addition to the earlier *note verbale* released by adding: 'China's sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the SCS are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence.' (Sun, 2012:9). Further, in response to Philippines application for arbitral consideration after the Scarborough Shoal incident between the two countries in 2012, China not only questioned the jurisdiction of the arbitration, but also refused appearance and rejected its ruling. In addition to this, it released a note which stated that:

China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands (the Dongsha Islands, the Xisha Islands, the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands) and the adjacent waters. Chinese activities in the South China Sea dates back to over 2,000 years ago. China was the first country to discover, name, explore and exploit the resources of the South China Sea islands and the first to continuously exercise sovereign powers over them (Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

From the wordings of this note, it could be inferred that China based its claims on historical rights. Though perusing the legality or otherwise of China's supposed historic claims might be outside the scope of this paper as that has been taken care of by the arbitral award in 2016 where China's claim of historical rights was declared illegal and non-existent in international law, clarifying the nine-dash line claims would help douse tension in the Sea.

Scholars have differed on whether China's nine-dash line amounts to assertiveness. For instance, Turcsanyi (2018) argued that the nine-dash line claims by China as submitted in 2009 amount to 'no policy change' (Turcsanyi, 2018:43), therefore, not assertive. Jerden (2014) calls it an 'adjustment change' (Jerden, 2014: 72) therefore, not assertive. To be sure, their central argument here is that the nine-dash line claim as presented by China in 2009 was not new as China has maintained the claim since 1950s. However, both scholars and others with similar views fail to explain the reason the eleven-dash line map originally presented by China suddenly became a nine-dash line map without concrete explanations and whether this policy cannot be seen as a policy change and therefore, assertive.

Third, China displays assertiveness through the application of physical force and confrontations. The first of such were cable-cutting incidents in 2011-2012 (Garcia, 2019). To begin with, on 26 May 2011, Chinese paramilitary ships severed a Vietnamese cable used for surveying. Also, there were two other reported instances of cutting of cables of Vietnamese surveying ships by Chinese maritime agencies (Ministry of Affairs Vietnam, 2011). In 2012, Chinese maritime guards repeated the same action against Vietnamese vessels (Page, 2012). There was a reported attempt to block Philippines and Malaysia's seismic research endeavours in their claimed areas. These unprovoked Chinese assertive actions attracted widespread criticisms even among Chinese scholars (see Perlez, 2012). Yet, China denied any wrongdoing.

Scarborough Shoal incident between China and the Philippines is another event. The incident took place on 10 April when Chinese fishing boats were seen in the waters also claimed by the Philippines. The crew of the Philippines *Gregario del pilar*, the biggest warship of the navy inspected Chinese boats and discovered some catches (International Crisis Group, 2015). Upon trying to arrest Chinese fishermen, they were prevented by superior Chinese surveillance vessels. The standoff continued until US intervention (Garcia, 2019). Aside this, there were reports of China's use of its power to pressure on the Philippines through severing economic ties with the Philippines on banana imports which

affected Philippines trade returns. The Philippines agreed to leave the Shoal and China restarted its banana trade with the Philippines (Garcia, 2019).

At the Second Thomas Shoal, an area not too far from the Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands witnessed a similar incident in May 2013 when Chinese surveillance vessels blocked some Filipino supply boats that were trying to reach the shoal and restock the supplies of the marines present on the spot (Glaser and Szalwinski 2013). It was reported that the Philippines had been maintaining their presence there after running aground an old ship called *Sierra Madre* in 1999. China claimed that the Philippines' boats were carrying construction materials to be used in the sea even though it was reported that the boats in question were used in sending supplies from the coast of the Philippines (Garcia, 2019). In 2014, similar incident also took place when the Chinese blocked Filipino civilian vessels used for restocking (Baruah, 2014).

The oil rig incident on 2 May 2014 is another show of Chinese assertiveness. The standoff was between Vietnam and China as a result of China's deployment of Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig in the disputed waters near the Paracel Islands, where both states claim their EEZ (Bower and Poling 2014). Following the deployment, about 30 Vietnamese boats attempted stopping more than 80 vessels of China Coast Guard. In the process, some Vietnamese personnel were injured while others were detained. China claimed the reason for its action was due to the upcoming typhoon (Garcia, 2019). However, it was reported that China repeated the deployment of the oil rig near the Paracel Islands though in its undisputed areas in 2015 (Panda, 2015a). This unilateral action by China provoked anti- China protests in Vietnam, leading to several recorded deaths and injuries of Chinese nationals.

Another provocative action of China in South China Sea is land reclamation, construction and militarization exercises. It has been reported that China, since 2014, has engaged in land reclamations and construction of artificial islands in at least seven locations in Spratlys and at least three in Paracels. In both islands, China have been seen turning them to large dry areas, building sea walls and constructing various structures on them, which in the words of Garcia (2019:50) include:

airfields, multi-floor buildings (some of them as tall as ten floors), radar towers, gun emplacements, ship docks, and helicopter bases. Some posts were constructed in such a way as to be able to serve as air and naval bases of China and to be able to harbour the biggest Chinese naval vessels and all types of China's aircraft. These works are consistent with the possible preparation of an air identification zone over the SCS, had China decided to declare one

Additionally, China has reclaimed, constructed and mounted airstrips ((Hardy and O'Connor 2015) and harbour in Fiery Cross Reef, which many believed would enable China to project power as the location connects mainland China and Malacca Strait, where world trading occurs. Though, China is not the only country carrying out land reclamation exercises, other claimants have at one point or the other carried out such activities. But, the magnitude of China's is asymmetrical. According to Pentagon, by August 2015 China reclaimed 2900 acres of land, Vietnam 80 acres, Malaysia 70 acres, the Philippines 14 acres, and Taiwan 8 acres (Lubold 2015). China claims that its airstrips construction is in order as it has sovereignty over the islands. Besides, as China claims, its reclamation and construction activities are in tandem with other claimants' construction activities in the islands.

On the other hand, China appears to have been nursing the sinister motive of militarizing the dry lands. In the context of South China Sea, militarization, according to Garcia (2019:52), connotes all the 'activities directly linked to showcasing or improving military capabilities in the SCS, including building military facilities on the newly constructed outposts'. Though China denied nursing the intention of militarizing the area, reports have shown that China has been making moves to actualize the militarization agenda. For instance, in April 2015, the Chinese foreign ministry admitted that the newly built features are not only for civilian purposes but also for 'necessary military defence requirements' (Glaser, 2015, cited in Garcia, 2019). More so, in January 2016, it was reported that China tested the constructed airstrip on Fiery Cross Reef using two civilian aircraft (Guardian, 2016). In late March, 2016, it was confirmed that China had deployed surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles on Woody Island (Panda, 2016b). Yet, China has denied all these reports while accusing the United States of militarizing the region and being directly responsible for rising tension in the region.

5. Energy Resources as Drivers of China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

The amount of oil and natural gas deposits in the South China Sea has been well reported by various sources even though the reports tend to vary. In 2013, the United States estimates that approximately, there are 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of gas of 'proved and probable' untapped resources located in the South China Sea (EIA, 2013), similar to the proved oil reserves in Mexico and are about two-thirds of proved natural gas reserves in Europe, excluding Russia (Metelitsa and Kupfer, 2014). China seems to estimate much higher in that in 2012, the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company estimates 125 billion barrels of oil and 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in undiscovered resources (Schofield, 2021). As asserted by Guoqiang (2016), if China's estimates should be relied upon, it means that 'the total hydrocarbon deposits in the SCS comprise more than one-third of China's total oil and gas resources and account for more than 12% of global hydrocarbon resources'. However, in spite of apparent lack of harmonized reports of oil and gas deposits in South China Sea, it cannot be disputed that there are energy resources in the sea.

In the same vein, the locations that embody these proved and probable oil and gas reserves have well been captured. According to EIA, most fields with proved and probable oil and gas reserves are clustered in undisputable parts of South China Sea, proximal to the shorelines of the coastal states but distant from the disputable islands. Metelitsa and Kupfer (2014), quoting industry sources assert that there is almost no oil and less than 100 billion cubic feet of natural gas in proved and probable reserves in the fields near the Spratlys. Moreover, they also estimate that the Paracelsharbour less natural gas and no oil. In addition, it is believed that natural oil and gas may also be found in underexplored areas of the

South China Sea. For instance, in 2012, the US Geological Survey estimated that an additional 12 billion barrels of oil and 160 cubic trillion cubic feet of natural gas might exist as undiscovered resources in the South China Sea (cited in Metelitsa and Kupfer, 2014). Indisputably, the intractable nature of the South China Sea claims owes much to energy resources. To be sure, most of the confrontations that have occurred in the sea were as a result of oil and gas deposits.

Though, the energy demand and consumption in Asia has increased in recent years, it is China's consumption and demand level that attract global attention. Simply put, the *raison d'être* for China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is oil and gas. Throughout the 1980s, China was self-sufficient in oil and in 1993 became a net importer of oil (Kyun, 2014). Its consumption is likely to double by 2030, resulting in increased import dependence. The burgeoning economy, advancement in technological know-how made possible by robust investment in R&D, increase in middle class structure, urbanization, and related concepts make China's demand for oil and gas souring. These domestic factors shape China's economic security policies which are based on three Es — economic growth, energy security and environmental protection. China reported in 2019 that its economic growth was 6.1 percent which was the lowest annual growth since 1990 (EIA, 2020). Even with the impact of Covid 19, China was the first country to announce economic recovery, announcing 3.2% gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the second quarter and 4.9% GDP growth in the third quarter of 2020 (Congressional Research Service, 2020). It is safe, therefore, to state that there is an undeniable nexus between China's economic performance and performance of manufacturing sector and exports which are heavily reliant on energy resources (oil and gas) even though coal has been a major source of China's energy consumption.

In 2019, EIA (2020) reports that China's oil consumption in the year under review accounts for two-thirds of global oil consumption, consuming an estimated 14.5 million b/d of petroleum and other liquids, up from 500,000 b/d, or nearly 4%, from 2018. China has intensified efforts in recent years to decrease oil dependence. In 2019, it was reported by National Bureau of Statistics that China produced 190 million tons of crude oil, an increase of 0.8% compared to 2018 (Deutschland-China, 2020). However, in spite of increased domestic production, China remained the highest oil importing country in 2019. It imported approximately 500 million tons of oil in 2019 showing that about 70% of China's oil consumption was from abroad (Deutschland-China, 2020). To be sure, China's highest oil import came from Saudi Arabia which accounted for about 18.4% of all imports, followed by Russia. Other countries such as the United Kingdom, Brazil, Libya, Angola, Iraq and Iran followed (EIA, 2020; Deutschland-China, 2020). This trend shows that domestic yearnings for oil far outweigh domestic production which necessitated importation from foreign countries.

As oil import dependence grows in China, so is natural gas even though there has been a slight increase in natural gas production in these few years. In the past three years, gas consumption has risen to 10%, failing to keep pace with domestic demand (Deutschland-China, 2020). Specifically, EIA (2020) reports that China's natural gas consumption rose by 9% in 2019 to 10.8 Tcf from 9.9 Tcf in 2018, making it the third-highest natural gas consumer behind the United States and Russia. China imports most of its natural gas from neighbours such as Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Myanmar, with Turkmenistan alone supplying about 70% of China's piped gas imports in 2018 (Deutschland-China, 2020). Several factors drive China's natural gas demand — Poor air quality caused by excessive pollution generated by coal, low prices of natural gas, higher use of natural gas in the transportation sector, expansion of natural gas infrastructure and quest to transport it demanding centres (Deutschland-China, 2020).

The Chinese government have been making efforts with robust policies to decrease oil and gas dependence and increase domestic production and sufficiency. The mandates to ensure further discovery, exploration and production of energy resources have been maintained by the 'three buckets of oil' (International Crisis Group, 2016), that is, National Oil Companies which comprise China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), under the effective supervision by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, but the Central Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appoints their top executives, who are also the companies' leading party cadres and typically hold vice-ministerial rank (Brødsgaard, 2012). In recent years, it appears that the focus of these triune oil corporations and that of Chinese military have turned to South China Sea. The result has been incessant skirmishes between China and other claimants. For instance, On May 26, 2011, two Chinese maritime surveillance vessels cut off the exploration cables of a Vietnamese oil survey ship searching for oil and gas deposits in Vietnam's EEZ some 120 kilometres off the southern Vietnamese coast. On June 9, a Chinese fishing boat similarly rammed the survey cables of another Vietnamese survey vessel even as two Chinese patrol boats harassed an oil exploration ship in the Philippine claim zone 250 kilometres west of Palawan on March (Buszynski, 2012).

The assertiveness of China in the South China Sea is related to energy resources and the need for energy resources is to maintain stability by avoiding vulnerabilities and uncertainties that often characterize global energy trade. Oil and gas are international tools for both war and diplomacy. In all truth, emerging and advanced countries rely heavily on these resources for their respective economies — to boost both manufacturing and consumption. This better explains fierce engagement between China and emerging economies such as Indonesia and India; and with advanced states such as the United States and Japan. Given the epistemological alertness of states as regards the capacity of oil to continue to fuel the engines of economy of states in the long term and the reality of low discovery of oil even in the face of increased exploratory activities, states including China have not failed to seek for close energy substitutes such as geothermal, hydro, nuclear, wind and solar to avoid potential for war as a result of stiff competition over the available scarce resources.

Oil is a non-renewable resource. Any oil field exploited cannot be replaced with oil. A country discovers only about one new barrel of oil for roughly every four it uses. This implies that the future of conventional oil is becoming bleak globally, giving way for unconventional one. As Carceres (2014) asserts, conventional oil is hard to exploit given that it is mostly embedded in clay, mud, tar and sand, making exploitation of large quantities difficult. Moreover, concentration of

large quantities of oil, about 50%, can be found in the Middle Eastern Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates and most of these areas are volatile capable of disrupting oil and gas supplies. Other countries such as Norway, Angola, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Libya, Mexico, Algeria, Nigeria, Qatar, Russia, the USA, China, and Venezuela have relatively small quantities of oil when compared with their counterparts in the Middle East. This perhaps vividly explains China's global energy insecurity and actions in the South China Sea.

China understands the meaning of war, having fought many in the time past. Obviously, it would not want to engage into one at least in the foreseeable future. Hence, its foreign policies over the years have captured benign languages suggesting deep craving for peace and diplomacy. The experience of Sino-Soviet oil relations in 1960s still reverberates in the minds of Chinese policy makers and scholars alike. The Soviet was instrumental to the development of Chinese oil industry as far back as 1950s. However, despite a split with Soviet, China still became dependent on the Soviet, a supposed adversary, for more than 50 percent of its refined oil consumption. The events that followed afterwards catapulted China to a strategic position as an oil exporter in the 1970s, which China did not only make earnings from exports, but also used the new found strength as a foreign policy tool to achieve domestic balance and avoid vulnerability. One instance, China sold oil to Japan below cost price in order to dampen Japan's drive to invest in Siberia's oil and gas sector so as to thwart any Soviet's ambition to attack north-eastern China — a region so important to China as its industrial hub and thus, vulnerable to foreign invasion through Siberia (Downs, 2006).

In contemporary times, it appears that China's fears have shifted from Soviet Union to the United States of America. Though, an average Chinese citizen sees its country as not too far away from the United States in both military and economic terms, policy analysts and Chinese government still perceive the lethality of the US power and therefore threads more carefully. China sees the United States as not supportive of its rise and therefore could do anything to suppress it. In this light, China feels that US naval presence in the Persian Gulf stretching down to the South China Sea through which the bulk of Chinese oil passes threatens its energy security in the face of any slightest provocation between the two countries. More worrisome is the fact that most claimants in South China Sea are allies of the United States which implies that the US presence must continually be felt in the region. Moreover, US longstanding interest in the Middle East from where the bulk of Chinese oil imports come further renders China more vulnerable to bitter confrontation with the US and possible disruptions in oil supplies.

Furthermore, China fears that the US can impose oil sanctions against China on the basis of various behaviours the US could see as going against international norms. As China is remarkably known for courting with states known for human rights abuses, corruption, sponsoring terrorism, undermining democratic values and working against western values in Africa, South America and Asia, China's fears in the US use of oil sanctions may not be totally overlooked. The case of Iran may be a perfect example in this regard.

Indeed, it is not far from the truth to argue that Chinese military modernization programmes, internationalization of China's CNPC as a way to stake its claim in the oil market, securing of pipeline contracts with some states in the region, acquiring development rights to Kazakhstan's Uzen and Aktyubinsk oil field (Downs, 2006), courting with states in the Central Asia which China feels are far from US presence and refusal of internationalization of South China Sea dispute are some of the measures to contain the US presence and by extension, avoid vulnerability.

Aside these external dimensions to China's oil vulnerability; there are also internal dimensions to it. Oil prices are not stable. Moreover, the cost of oil importation from China's oil partners around the world impacts Chinese economy. As China strives to maintain economic parity with the United States, any suspected activity capable of dislocating the economy will be resisted vehemently. As global oil demands rise, leading to fierce competition among states with attendant souring oil prices, China sees the South China Sea as a shade to avoid economy-impacting oil prices. Also, China cannot afford to risk protests from its citizens in the event of oil scarcity. The events of Arab Spring that changed political traditions in most Arab states and swept governments away may have taught China a great lesson. China has realized the power of the people to change baton when things are not moving as they want (Carceres, 2014). Thus, regular and steady supply of oil and gas to the Chinese consumers would further ensure stability at home. Further, as China tries to convince its citizens of the credibility of the CCP-led government, eliminating vulnerability that would impede constant and sufficient supply of oil and gas to the demanding Chinese population would further legitimize the government. Besides, an average Chinese believes that South China Sea is China's and therefore, any claimant or foreign intruder is expected to be shown the exit door. To this end, South China Sea is seen in the Chinese quarters as not only an area of refuge in avoiding vulnerability associated with oil dependence, but also an area that can further guarantee China's pre-eminence in the global economy.

6. Concluding Thoughts

China's economic growth has come with a price — increasing hunger for oil and gas. This is because increased industrialization, urbanization, geometric social movement from lower to middle class and developed transportation sector are catalysts for China's global pre-eminence. Also, China does not wish to stop here. It intends with robust policies to continue to ensure vibrant education sector, more growth for private enterprises, improved transport system that would accelerate economic activities, improved health care, well-paid jobs and other infrastructural dividends. All these and more depend on consistent, constant and sufficient energy resources. Since 1993, it has become clear that domestic production of most of these resources would not be enough for domestic consumption, let alone for export.

Chinese government appears to comprehend the risk inherent in trade dependence, especially in oil and gas in addition to the knowledge of the fact that maritime power defines contemporary global politics. The United States of America has been enjoying 'unipolar moment' since the end of cold war and has so maintained it owing to strong and

formidable navy that superintends over most of the waters globally. Indeed, China cannot boast of equal strength with the US militarily. With sophisticated naval power at the disposal of the US and its pivot to Africa and Asia to ensure global dominance, China sees vulnerability in relying on oil imports from these regions.

South China Sea appears to be a region that China seeks to ensure its survival and stability. The region has become a tectonic plate fuelling confrontations and in what appears to be a 'new cold' war between the US and China. Due to abundance of both oil and natural gas deposits in the South China Sea, Chinese government sees a stable and forward-looking China marching towards the path of more economic prosperity and global dominance. This explains its assertiveness in South China Sea, confronting claimants and non-claimants alike.

Further, as South China becomes a 'core interest' to China, it has become poised on developing naval power to contain the presence of the US in the region. There is always growing negative sentiments in the mind of an average Chinese about the US. It is believed in various quarters of China that arms sales to Taiwan, Hong Kong's independence agitations, the deployment of two aircraft carrier battle groups incessant American criticism of China's human rights record, arms sales to Taiwan, the deployment of two aircraft carrier battle groups to the waters around Taiwan during China's 1996 missile tests, the Philippines application to the Court of Arbitration in 2013, the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the revision of the U.S.-Japan security guidelines (Downs, 2006) and hosts of others are steps taken by the US to undermine China's enviable rise. More worrisome is the fact that no state is powerful enough to balance against the US. Thus, self-help appears to be the best way to confront it.

As it is common with rising powers, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea will not stop soonest even in the face of the award given by the Court of Arbitration in 2016 against some of the China's claims. In fact, China has described the award as a fairy tale; lacking in merit. More confrontations, military modernization and deployment and land reclamations should be expected. This will be exacerbated as China witnesses more economic prosperity and domestic pressure that comes along with it. With this in mind, it is expected that the US understands the changing global power configuration and seeks to bargain with or recognize the areas which are of core interests to China (He and Feng 2012: 635). This would ensure a balanced system and reduce the propensity for tension in the South China Sea or elsewhere. The Trump's administration saw a determined China that was willing to respond in the face of any threat be it economic or military. It is expected that Biden's administration would toe the line of Obama's administration in enhancing diplomatic relations with China.

Further, it is expected that both China and other parties to South China Sea should respect international norms and pursue peaceful negotiations as stipulated in the agreed Code of Conduct 2002. The prospect for joint development of resources should be encouraged as confrontations have the capacity of denting the image of China within the region and beyond. Moreover, as China continues to be the largest trading partner of most states in the region, confrontations with China would undoubtedly not be to the interest of these states as their economies would be heavily affected.

7. References

- i. Borgerson, S. G. (2009). 'The National Interest and the Law of the Sea', *Council on Foreign Relations: Council Special Report No. 46*
- ii. Baruah, D. M. (2014, April 30). Second Thomas Shoal: The new battleground. *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/second-thomas-shoal-the-new-battleground/>
- iii. Beckman, R. (2013). The UU Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 107:142
- iv. Boon, H.T. (2017). Hardening the Hard, Softening the Soft: Assertiveness and China's Regional Strategy, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40:5, 639-662.
- v. Bower, E. Z., and Poling, G. B. (2014, May 7). China-Vietnam tensions high over drilling rig in Disputed Waters. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at <http://csis.org/publication/critical-questions-china-vietnam-tensions-high-over-drilling-rig-disputed-waters>
- vi. Brødsgaard, K.E. (September, 2012). 'Politics and Business Group Formation in China: The Party in Control?', *China Quarterly*, pp. 633-634.
- vii. Buszynski, L. (2012). The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.—China Strategic Rivalry. *The Washington Quarterly*, 35(2): 139-156 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.666495>
- viii. Buszynski, L. (2010). Rising Tensions in the South China Sea: Prospects for a Resolution of the Issue, *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 85-104.
- ix. Cáceres, S. B. (2014). *China's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Power and resources*. New York: Routledge.
- x. Carpio, A.T. (2017). *The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea*. Ebook Published by Carpio, A.T. Available at the website of the Institute for Maritime and Ocean Affairs (<https://www.imoa.ph>)
- xi. Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2021). Understanding China's 2021 Defense Budget. Available at www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-chinas-2021-defense-budget. Accessed 12 July, 2021.
- xii. Chang, F.K. (2012). *China's Naval Rise and the South China Sea: An Operational Assessment*. Published by Elsevier Limited on behalf of Foreign Policy Research Institute.
- xiii. Chen, D., and Pu, X. (2013, Winter). Debating China's assertiveness. *International Security*, 38(3), 176-183
- xiv. Christensen, T. J. (2011). The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(2), 54-67

- xv. Congressional Research Service (CRS) (October, 2020). China's Economy in 2020: Navigating Headwinds. Available at www.2020-10-19_IF11667_10f4dd17fdd4449de41cf817119eeb16ca52fcb6.pdf.
- xvi. Cordesman, A. and Yarosh, N. S. (2012). 'Chinese Military Modernization and Force Development: A Western Perspective,' *Centrefor Strategic and International Studies*, p. 32, <http://csis.org/publication/ch>
- xvii. Deutschland-China (2020). China Energy Transition Status Report 2020. Beijing, China: Sino-German Energy Transition Project.
- xviii. Downs, E. S. (2006). China's Quest for Energy's Security. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- xix. Energy Information Administration (EIA) (September, 2020). Country Analysis Executive Summary: China. Accessed July 21, 2021.
- xx. Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (2014). Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines, Beijing, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1217147.shtml. Accessed 14 July 2021.
- xxi. Fravel, M.T. (2011). China's Strategy in the South China Sea, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 3. pp. 292–319.
- xxii. Friedberg, A. L. (2015, Winter). The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness. *The Washington Quarterly*, 37, 133–150.
- xxiii. Garcia, Z. (2019). China's Military Modernization, Japan's Normalization and the South China Sea Territorial Disputes. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- xxiv. Glaser, B. S., and Szalwinski, A. (2013). Second Thomas Shoal likely the next flashpoint in the South China Sea. *China Brief*, 13(13).
http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D%41054&cHash%4a7d10c92688430f1274bb09b95b18bcf#Vw9JDfmLTIU
- xxv. Guardian. (2016, January 7). Chinese Civilian jet airliners land at disputed South China Sea Island—State media.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/chinese-civilian-jet-airliners-land-at-disputed-south-china-sea-island-state-media>
- xxvi. Guoqiang, L. (2015, May 11). 'China Sea Oil and Gas Resources,' China Institute of International Studies, Available at http://www.cis.org.cn/english/2015-05/11/content_7894391.htm. Accessed 4 July 2021.
- xxvii. Hancox, D; Prescott, V. & Schofield, C.H. (1995). A Geographical Description of the Spratly Islands and an Account of Hydrographic Surveys amongst those Islands. Durham, UK: International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham.
- xxviii. Hardy, J., and O'Connor, S. (2015, September 25). China completes runway on fiery cross reef. HIS Jane's. <http://www.janes.com/article/54814/china-completes-runway-on-fiery-cross-reef>
- xxix. He, K., and Feng, H. (2012). Debating China's assertiveness: Taking China's power and interests seriously. *International Politics*, 49, 633–644.
- xxx. Hurrell, A. (2010). 'Brazil and the New Global Order,' *Current History*, pp. 60–66
- xxxi. International Crisis Group (2015). Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm. Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group Headquarters.
- xxxii. International Crisis Group (January, 2016). Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters. Crisis Group Asia Report N°275, Brussels, Belgium.
- xxxiii. Jerden, B. (2014). The Assertive China Narrative: Why it is wrong and how so many still bought into it, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(1), 47–88.
- xxxiv. Johnston, A. I. (Spring, 2013). How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness? *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 7–48
- xxxv. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. (2013, March 8). China: New leaders, same assertive foreign policy. CNN. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/08/opinion/china-foreign-policy-kleine-ahlbrandt/>
- xxxvi. Kyun, J.S. (2014). Drivers of China's Assertive South China Sea Strategy, *Strategy* 21, Vol.17 No.1.
- xxxvii. Laurence, H. (2007). 'Japan's Proactive Foreign Policy and the Rise of the BRICS,' *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 31, No., pp. 177–203.
- xxxviii. Lubold, G. (2015, August 20). Pentagon says China has stepped up land reclamation in South China Sea. *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-says-china-has-stepped-up-land-reclamation-in-south-china-sea-1440120837>
- xxxix. M. Overhaus, M. (2005, Summer–Fall) 'German Foreign Policy and the Shadow of the Past,' *SAIS Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2005), pp. 27–41
- xl. Metelitsa, A. and Kupfer, J. (2014). Oil and Gas Resources and Transit Issues in the South China Sea, *Asian Society Policy*, 1–6.
- xli. Panda, A. (2015a, June 27). China's HD-981 oil rig returns, near disputed South China Sea Waters. *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/chinas-hd-981-oil-rig-returns-to-disputed-south-china-sea-waters/>
- xlii. Panda, A. (2016b, March 26). South China Sea: China has deployed anti-ship missiles on Woody Island. *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/south-china-sea-china-has-deployed-anti-ship-missiles-on-woody-island/>

- xliii. Perlez, J. (2012, December 4). Dispute flares over energy in South China Sea. *New York Times*. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/asia/china-vietnam-and-india-fight-over-energyexploration-in-south-china-sea.html?_r=40
- xliv. Raditio, H. K. (2019). Understanding China's Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective. Sydney, NSW, Australia: Palgrave Macmillan.
- xlv. Salil, S. (2012). China's Strategy in the South China Sea: The Role of the United States and India. New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd
- xlvi. Schofield, C. (2021). Competing Maritime Claims and Enduring Disputes in the South China Sea, In: Zou, K. (ed). Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea. New York: Routledge.
- xlvii. Scobell, A., and Harold, S. W. (2013). An Assertive China? Insights from Interviews. *Asian Security*, 9(2), 111–131
- xlviii. Shambaugh, D. (2004). *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, Prospects*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 1–2.
- xlix. Sun, Y. (2012). 'Studying the South China Sea: The Chinese Perspective,' *East and South China Seas Bulletin*, 9,. Accessed July 12, 2021.
 - i. Swaine, M. (2010, May). 'Perceptions of an Assertive China,' *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 32, p. 10: 1.
 - ii. Swaine, M. D. (2010). 'Perceptions of an Assertive China', *China Leadership Monitor*, 32. Hoover Institute. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM32MS.pdf>
 - iii. Swaine, M. D. (2011a). 'China's Assertive Behaviour. Part one: On 'core interests', *China Leadership Monitor*, 34. Hoover Institute. <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM34MS.pdf>
 - iiii. Swaine, M. D. (2011b). 'China's Assertive Behavior. Part three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy'. *China Leadership Monitor*, 36. Hoover Institute. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM36MS.pdf>
 - lv. Swaine, M. D., and Fravel, T. M. (2011). China's Assertive Behaviour. Part two: The Maritime Periphery. *China Leadership Monitor*, 35. Hoover Institute. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM35MS.pdf>
 - lv. Tian, N. and Su, F. (2021). A New Estimate of China's Military Expenditure. Sweden: SIPRI.
 - lvi. Till, G. (2007). 'The South China Sea Dispute: An International History.' Paper presented at the International Conference on The South China Sea: Towards a Cooperative Management Regime, Singapore between May 16 and 17, 2007 organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University
 - lvii. Turcsanyi, R.Q. (2018). Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power Sources, Domestic Politics, and Reactive Foreign Policy. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.
 - lviii. United States Energy Information Administration (EIA) (2013). 'South China Sea', available at <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea>.
 - lix. US Department of Defense (2020). Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020. Annual Report to Congress A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, as Amended
 - lx. Wezeman, S. T. (2019). Arms Flows to South East Asia. Soln, Sweden: SIPRI
 - lxi. Yahuda, M. (2013). China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22(81), 446–459
 - lxii. Zou, K. (Ed.) (2021). Routledge Handbook on South China Sea. New York: Routledge