

# THE SUNRISE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE JAPANESE STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira<sup>1</sup>

Felipe Gusmão Carioni Fernandes<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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The emergence of territorial conflicts in the South China Sea (SCS) has driven not only the dispute between regional and extra-regional powers, but also a broad debate about sovereignty and asymmetry of power in the region. Considering the increasing participation of the Japanese archipelago in the SCS, this article aims to analyze its performance and its strategic interests in the maritime theater of Southeast Asia through a geopolitical analysis. The article's hypothesis is that since the SCS is a space of Japanese strategic interest, any change in the region's status quo could pose a risk to Japan's vital communication and commercial routes and to the power configuration in the East Sea; therefore, the archipelago has been approaching countries in Southeast Asia in order to balance Chinese power. The article concludes that the SCS is a central area for the Japanese archipelago from a military and economic point of view and that Chinese assertiveness has allowed Japan to act in Southeast Asia and encouraged military cooperation with some countries in the SCS (such as the Philippines and Vietnam).

**Keywords:** South China Sea. Japan. Geopolitics. Strategic Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student. Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil. E-mail: alanacamoca@gmail.com / Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0330-3368>

<sup>2</sup> PhD student. Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil. E-mail: felipecarioni@hotmail.com / Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0149-5896>

## INTRODUCTION

Since its political and economic restructuring in the late 1970s, China's economic rise has transformed the balance of power in East Asia. Currently, several studies<sup>3</sup> have questioned the strategic interests of the Asian giant and raised concerns about the Chinese performance in its regional surroundings and its increasing penetration in Latin America and Africa – places where there was a supremacy of the influence of European powers as France and England, besides the USA.

Perceptions regarding Chinese assertiveness in its close regional surroundings are seen by the escalation of territorial disputes between China and its neighbors both in the East China Sea (ECS), with the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and in the South China Sea (SCS), with disputes over the Paracel and Spratlys archipelagos, as well as the Scarborough shoal. Chinese assertiveness coupled with the increase in its economic and military capabilities has evoked pessimism on the international scenario regarding its behavior. After all, its growth at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reached 10% per year and continued at high rates even after the 2008 crisis. In addition, there is a gradual increase in China's military spending, which in 2016 alone, for example, totaled US\$ 151 billion (SIPRI, 2018).

For this article, we are interested in discussing the geopolitics of the South Sea, which is a maritime area of about 3 million km<sup>2</sup>, located in Southeast Asia, where China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines interact. The SCS is a space coveted not only by regional players, but by extraregional players that depend on the region to meet their internal demands, such as Japan. From an economic point of view, the region is rich in mineral and energy resources, as well as living resources due to marine diversity. The SCS is home to 3,365 species of fish, being one of the five largest fish producing areas on the planet. The volume of fishing in the region is estimated to reach around 10 million tons, which would correspond to 12% of the world volume of catches a year. In turn, this volume would translate into values of US\$ 21.8 billion. Fishing in the SCS also has important socioeconomic significance, since 1.77 million fishing boats work in an official and regulated manner in

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples are: Mearsheimer, John J. 2010. "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US's Power in Asia." *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 3, No.

the SCS (55% of the world fleet), which corresponds to 3.7 million people employed in this economic sector (SUMAILA & CHEUNG, 2015).

The region's relevance stimulates a geopolitical dispute over resources, the free access of maritime routes and influence, which has encouraged greater performance of extra-regional players in the SCS. In this sense, Japan has been participating more actively in the region, either by sending military forces for training and symbolic operations, or by promoting cooperation agreements with the Southeast Asia countries.

Since the end of World War II Japan imports large quantities of oil to feed its industry and meet the demands of its people. However, unlike China, Japan has never had an abundance of natural resources, and despite discovering some reserves of gas in its maritime territories, Japan is deficient when it comes to strategic resources such as oil and natural gas.

Generally speaking, Japan needs to import about 90% of its energy resources. The largest suppliers of Japanese oil and natural gas are in the Middle East, so for oil and natural gas to reach Japan, they must pass through the Strait of Hormuz in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca in the SCS. (FUNABASHI, 2015). Japan is dependent not only on energy resources, but also on several other natural and mineral resources to supply both its industry and population. After all, because it is located in the "Pacific Ring of Fire", the country has several volcanic regions that go from the extreme North to the South, making only a small portion of the archipelago's lands suitable for agriculture (KENNEDY, 1988).

As such, Japan relies heavily on maritime trade and, for this reason, any change in the SCS affects Japanese economy and policy considerably. In addition, as Japan disputes the territories of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with China, any change in the territorial boundaries of the SCS affects the legitimacy and prestige of Tokyo regarding the dispute in the ECS (KOGA, 2017).

This article argues that the SCS is one of the areas of Japanese strategic interest because a possible conflict resolution in favor of China poses a risk to the regional balance of power. The article's hypothesis is that as the SCS is a space of Japanese strategic interest, any change in the region's status quo could pose a risk to Japan's vital communication and commercial routes and to the power configuration in the East Sea; therefore, the archipelago has been approaching countries in Southeast Asia in order to balance Chinese power.

In this sense, it is postulated that in the 21st century Japanese participation in this scenario is consolidated through the strengthening of economic and military relations with countries involved in the dispute, especially the Philippines and Vietnam. To this end, this article is based on geopolitics and the search for natural resources as lenses of analysis to understand Japanese concerns and role in East Asia<sup>4</sup> in the 21st century.

## GEOPOLITICS OF THE SEA AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Geopolitics has as “object of study the relations and mutual interactions between the State and its geography” (MELLO, 1999, p. 74). The relationship between nation-states depends on several factors including geographic location, natural resources, economic needs, history, political system and the very structure of the international system. After all, the world population increased, resources became abundant and later scarce, political systems were no longer ideal types and were adapted according to realities, empires rose and fell, but the geography factor remained constant (MORGENTHAU, 2003, p. 257; SPYKMAN, 1938).

Because the geographic characteristics of states are relatively unchanging and unchangeable, the geographic demands of those states will remain the same for centuries, and because the world has not yet reached that happy state where the wants of no man conflict with those of another, those demands will cause dispute. Thus at the door of geography may be laid the blame for many of the age-long struggles which run persistently through history while governments and dynasties rise and fall (SPYKMAN, 1938, p. 9).

The guiding thread of geopolitical theories is the understanding that geography is elementary in the relationship between States, whether they are troubled or stable. Just as the geographical position brings benefits to a State, it also constrains the actions of certain countries that live directly with rivals and major players in the region (KAPLAN, 2013; 2014).

We argue that, given the regional particularity, studies on East Asia and its strategies need to consider issues such as: (i) the geography

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<sup>4</sup> (Winter), pp. 381–396; or Friedberg, Aaron L. 2011. “Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics.” *National Interest*, June 21, National Interest.org;

and maritime capabilities of countries in the regional surroundings; (ii) living and non-living mineral and natural resources and; (iii) the political-military interests and strategies of the countries involved in this theater.

### **i) The Sea and its maritime capabilities**

Alfred Mahan<sup>5</sup> (2007 [1890]) in the book *“The Influence of Sea Power upon History”* understands that the power of the State was the measure that guaranteed the security of its territory and population. The oceans can be described as *“a vast social and political space with their own characteristics that distinguished them from terrestrial spaces but linked to them by ports and inland communication channels”* (COSTA, 1992, p. 70). Analyzing European history and the influence of the seas on the dynamics of power throughout history, the author writes and praises the importance of the maritime domain that leads to wealth in times of peace and victory in times of war.

Before the evolution of land transport, more specifically, of railways, communication between continents and their trade depended to a large extent on inland communication routes (navigable rivers) and oceanic sea routes. However, even when terrestrial communication became more sophisticated, maritime exchanges did not lose their importance, since the better integration between the interior of continents and their coasts only intensified the volumes of maritime flows.

According to Mahan, the State that managed to dominate this global trade network would also conquer the inputs of power, for this reason, the constitution of a vast maritime power was necessary. This, in turn, depended on the construction of naval capabilities that were able to dominate a strategic trinomial placed as production-navigation-colonies:

production, with the necessity of exchanging products, shipping, whereby the exchange is carried on, and colonies, which facilitate and enlarge the operations of shipping and tend to protect it by multiplying points of safety—is to be found the key to much of the history, as well as of the policy, of nations bordering upon the sea (MAHAN, 2007, p. 28).

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan was a leading US naval officer who influenced a number of American politicians and strategists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Another author who contributed in a valuable way to the geopolitical understanding of the oceans was Nicholas Spykman (1944). In elaborating his project for the lines of defense in the western hemisphere, he paid great attention to the control of transoceanic<sup>6</sup> islands and continental ports. In his view, their dominance represented the second line of hemispheric defense, the first being placed directly on the borders of Eurasia, while the third should be placed precisely on the American continent. According to him, the islands were part of the paths that led to the Americas. Thus, the country that had those islands would be able to intervene on the continent, constituting an obstacle to American security.

Considering the hypothesis of this article, the SCS is one of the vital trade and communication routes for the Japanese and in the light of the teachings of Spykman (1942) and Mahan (2007), and the archipelago needs to guarantee free navigation and/or control of essential routes for its development and survival. For this reason the rapprochement with Southeast Asian countries and military training in the region become basic elements of Japanese strategies to guarantee their trade routes and the maintenance of the region's balance of power.

### **Figure 1: participation in% of scs in total trade in selected countries**

As shown in Figure 1<sup>7</sup>, commercial traffic that transits through the SCS represents a significant portion of the total transactions in the most important countries in the Northeast and Southeast Asia. In 2016 alone, it is stipulated that about USD 3.37 trillion dollars in trade passed through the SCS. According to the UNCTAD (*The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*), it is estimated that 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is transported by sea. Of this volume, 60% of maritime trade passes through Asia, with the SCS being one of the most important regions (UNCTAD, 2018). It is estimated that around US \$ 3.37 trillion in trade circulated in the SCS in 2016, denoting at least 21% of the world trade (CHINA POWER, 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> There would be a kind of geographical parallelism between Eurasia and North America, since both would be surrounded by the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Arctic Sea. The two regions would be interconnected via transoceanic islands.

<sup>7</sup> The original Map was cut out to highlight the importance of the SCS in East Asia.

Therefore, this region is critical for China and Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, which depend on the Malacca Strait<sup>8</sup> – which connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean via SCS – for the maintenance of their trade routes and the good functioning of their economies. Regarding Japan, about 42% of its maritime trade in 2016 was carried out via the SCS, while in the same year, 64% of Chinese trade and 80% of their oil imports depended on that region (CHINA POWER, 2017).

## ii) Strategic resources and the dispute for energy

In addition to the importance of the oceans as the route through which most of the world's wealth is transported and the relevance of the transoceanic islands for the defense strategy and power projection of the States, more recently the seas have also become a source of strategic resources for state development. For this reason, some authors such as Michael Klare (2008) claim that today we live in times of troubled waters.

In recent years, great technological advances in the field of deep exploration have made it possible to extract wealth from marine subsoils that were previously inaccessible. Transformation of the oceans into sources that produce strategic resources such as oil, natural gas and ores reshaped the state's view of these spaces. According to Brozowski (2013, p. 58) *“the ocean was no longer valued only as a strategic means due to its geographical position in relation to trade routes, defense and security and it also came to be seen as a source of mineral wealth”*.

Since 1982, when the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS in English) was signed (later ratified in 1994), many States have stepped up their efforts in defining, mapping and defending their coastal areas. States were seeking to guarantee, based on international law and political realism, their maritime lines and rights to exploit these strategic areas. Although UNCLOS has determined the terms under which sovereignty in the oceans must be defined and provides mechanisms for resolving disputes between states, such as the case of the International

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<sup>8</sup> The Malacca Strait is the most strategic transit route for trade, even though there are also Sunda and Lombok Straits. It is considered as the most economically efficient passage between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. China Power Project (2017) estimated that when using the Sunda Strait, within a week, additional costs to trade would be increased by USD\$ 64.5 million. Costs would increase to USD\$ 119 million if it were necessary to redirect the route across the Lombok Strait. In the worst case scenario, if the three straits were inaccessible, ships should head towards the South coast of Australia which would cost about USD\$ 2.8 billion a month to trade (CHINA POWER, 2017).

Court of Justice (ICJ), not all states agree with the institution and with the decisions made by it.

Currently, there is an increase in state investments in maritime security devices (represented by the increase in the number of ships patrolling routes and complaints by maritime support points). At the same time, there is also a race to define their territorial seas, continental shelves and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). However, in practice, this translates into a decrease in the political and military maneuver space of each State in maritime spaces. Consequently, it leads to an increase in the number of border disputes and military accidents in the oceans.

According to Michael Klare (2008, p. 59), the rise of new powers in the international system, such as China, India and other countries, added to the increase in energy needs to supply internal demands, have caused great instabilities and escalated territorial conflicts.

Until recently, the global hunt for vital resources had been dominated almost entirely by the mature industrialized powers. Three centers of economic might— the United States, Japan, and Europe— devoured the vast majority of the oil, natural gas, coal, uranium, and other primary sources of energy used worldwide, along with disproportionate amounts of other industrial commodities such as iron ore, copper, aluminum, and tin. In the past decade or so, however, brash young competitors have been muscling their way onto the scene with roaring economies that devour mammoth quantities of raw materials just to sustain their explosive rates of growth. The emergence of these assertive new consumers has completely altered the resource playing field. (KLARE, 2008, p. 63).

With the changes in the system and the rise of new countries economically and politically, regions such as Africa, South America and Southeast Asia received the attention of the great powers. After all, as Klare mentions (2008, p. 33), *“not only is the consumption of, and demand for, energy and other vital resources reaching unprecedented heights, but many existing reserves are visibly being drained faster than new reserves can be brought online”*.

Given this, the expansion of Chinese companies and the establishment of closer relations between China and the countries of Africa and the South American continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for example, are representative cases of how these resources influenced Chinese strategic

interests. From an energy point of view, in early 2002 China consumed almost 7% of global oil, while the USA absorbed 20%. In 2006, the Chinese consumption represented 8.5% of world consumption and already in 2017 China represented 23.2% of global consumption of energy and its dependence on imports of oil is 68%, the highest of its history (BP, 2018). Japan's energy dependence stands out. In 2014, Japanese consumption of oil, for example, was 4.3 million barrels per day and natural gas was 118 billion cubic meters (BP, 2017). Japan's production of such goods, however, is limited, reaching only 137 million barrels per day and 4.9 billion cubic meters of natural gas (OLIVEIRA, 2015).

As the oceans have been gaining economic value, the maritime straits have also gradually gained more relevance with the discoveries of offshore energy deposits, as well as the increasing volumes of oil that are transported across the seas. The entire volume of world maritime trade is estimated to go through at least one bottleneck (KLARE, 2008). In this sense, the SCS represents one of the most fundamental bottlenecks for the Japanese archipelago.

According to data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) (2013), it is difficult to determine the amount of oil and natural gas in the SCS due to territorial disputes in the region that make it impossible for further investigations to be made. However,

most current discovered fields cluster in uncontested parts of the sea, close to the shorelines of the coastal countries. EIA estimates there to be approximately 11 billion barrels (bbl) of oil reserves and 190 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of natural gas reserves in the South China Sea

**Table 1: proven and estimated reserves of oil and natural gas in the scs****South China Sea estimated proved and probable reserves**

Country name	Crude oil and liquids reserves (billion barrels)	Natural gas reserves (trillion cubic feet)
Brunei	1.5	15
China	1.3	15
Indonesia	0.3	55
Malaysia	5.0	80
Philippines	0.2	4
Taiwan	-	-
Thailand	-	1
Vietnam	3.0	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>190</b>

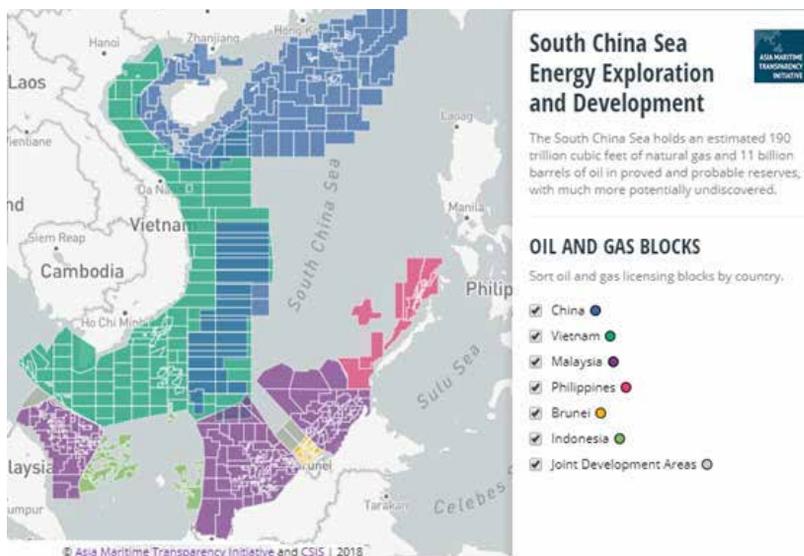
Note: Reserve totals do not include Gulf of Thailand or onshore reserves.

Reserve estimates are based on field ownership status.

(EIA, 2013). Source: EIA, 2013

In recent years some countries have cooperated, despite territorial disputes, to exploit energy resources in disputed regions, as the case in Malaysia and Brunei in 2009, Malaysia and Thailand in 1991, and Malaysia and Vietnam in 1997 (EIA, 2013).

**Figure 2: exploration of energy resources  
in the scs**



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and CSIS, 2018

### iii) The interests and strategies of the countries involved

The positioning of a particular country on the international stage places it in the face of specific constraints, that is, as two States do not have exactly the same geographical characteristics and territorial limits, they do not have identical strategic interests, national interests are based on their own experiences and political conditions that will eventually influence and constrain their internal and foreign policy (SPYKMAN, 1938, p. 9).

Just as States seek to supply their energy resources, as shown above, and to ensure their trade routes, countries aim to guarantee their security. Faced with the system's threats vis-à-vis their relative power on the international stage, countries channel their efforts into certain strategies to guarantee their economic, political and military interests. For this reason, as stated by Mearsheimer (2001), States seek to maximize their powers and do so by taking into account risks, profits and losses<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> According to Spykman (1938), the power policy between nations is always exercised in the sense of obtaining a positive margin of power that can be externally projected in the search for a more comfortable accommodation within the world order, or more appropriate in

For this reason, power asymmetries can make countries more vulnerable to peer pressure, due to both military and/or economic superiority. Regarding military spending in the context of Southeast Asia, China appears as the most preponderant player. According to SIPRI data, organized by Moraes (2015) from 1993 to 2013, Chinese military spending had a positive variation of 630%. In terms of values, this means a jump from US\$ 23 billion to US\$ 171.4 billion. The state with the second highest growth for the same period was Vietnam<sup>10</sup>, which had a positive variation of 448%, from US\$ 0.6 billion to US\$ 3.2 billion. However, at the end of 2013 it was Taiwan with US \$ 10 billion that had the second largest military spending in the region, a significant value, however small when compared to the Chinese. By updating these percentages from the most recent information made available by SIPRI, by 2017, the Chinese spending had grown 33% more, reaching US\$ 228 billion. Meanwhile, Taiwan has remained practically stagnant since 2013 and Vietnam experienced a 53.2% increase, reaching US \$ 5 billion. It is also essential to highlight changes in the distribution of Chinese military spending. Moraes (2015) anticipated that from 2013 to 2018 there would be a transfer of resources from landforces<sup>11</sup> to the air and maritime forces, so as to equalize spending with these two sectors in the future.

As for Japan, at the end of 2013 the country's military spending was US\$ 45.4 billion, by the end of 2017 that figure had risen only 2% (US\$ 46.5 billion) (SIPRI, 2018). Still, Tokyo does not have aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines or ballistic missiles, technologies that Beijing already dominates or is about to do. Therefore, it is all the more pressing for the Japanese State to achieve alliances and cooperation with the other players of the SCS and to strengthen its alliance with the USA to counteract the increase in Chinese capabilities in geopolitically sensitive areas. According to Hikotani (2019), a former professor at the National Defense Academy of Japan, it is important to point out that the increase in Chinese assertiveness and Japan's interest in performances at the SCS impact on Japan's military

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the interests of security and defense of the State. In this way, the international projection of States should pay attention to geopolitical fundamentals such as relative position, resources present in space, industrial level, war production, population, territorial extension, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Vietnam is the state that currently has the largest number of territories in the SCS and can be considered China's biggest adversary when it comes to dominating this space.

<sup>11</sup> The army has historically been the privileged military force in China. The change in the allocation of military resources to the navy and aeronautics demonstrates a change in the paradigms of Chinese national interest and here we point out that such change is directly related to the gain in importance of maritime geopolitical boards such as the SCS and ECS.

reorganization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this sense, the archipelago has been promoting changes through the interest in purchasing equipment as the first aircraft carrier since World War II and the resizing of troops to islands in the south and southeast.

Analyzing the SCS geopolitically in the light of Spykman, we must consider that this region is one of the Rimland sea fronts, which is composed and defined by the marginal areas of Europe, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East. The main geographical aspect of these spaces is their amphibious character, that is, their potential for both continental and oceanic projection. In more specific terms, Rimland would be located between the “desert and mountainous ring that surrounded the Siberian plain and the maritime semicircle that surrounded the Eurasian continent” (MELLO, 1999, p. 120). Therefore, as it is the contact area between the Eurasian coast and the marginal seas that surround it, Rimland constitutes the express way of the commercial and military traffic of the World Island, which connects Africa and the Middle East to the East Asia (KAPLAN, 2013, p. 104).

As presented above, the SCS is a strategic area from the point of view of strategic resources and for being an important trade route. In addition, any change in relations between countries in the region and the increase or decrease in the power of the USA, Japan and China, can affect the regional balance of power.

Generally speaking, from the point of view of Chinese strategic interests, part of Chinese strategy in the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is derived from the thinking of Liu Huaqing (1916-2011), who was a commander of the Navy from 1982 to 1988. The author developed the “Maritime Chains” strategy, a national security doctrine based on the need for Chinese coastal defense. This strategy is based on the sectioning of maritime spaces that have political and economic relevance for China (COLE, 2015). The First Chain of Islands borders the Sea of Japan, the SCS, and the ECS. In this strategy, the first chain begins in the islands of Philippines, passes through Malaysia and ends in Vietnam. Liu Huaqing’s proposal was that such territory would be in full control of China until the 2000s. The Second Chain of Islands begins in Japan’s territory and extends through the Pacific Ocean ending in Indonesia. China should have full control and projection over this territory until 2020 (COLE, 2015).

Although the control of neither chain has been achieved from the point of view of territorial extension, China has built artificial islands

in the SCS, capable of handling high-tech missiles and armaments (PANDA, 2018). Furthermore, the increase in Chinese military spending and the acquisition of armaments with the A2/AD strategy<sup>12</sup> (anti-access/ *denial area*) aims to consolidate Chinese influence in the SCS or at least guarantee the military capacity to mitigate/neutralize possible attacks from powers such as USA and Japan in case of conflicts (GREEN et al, 2017). If China continues to solidify its positions on the Paracel, Spratly and Scarborough shoal, a Chinese-dominated triangle would form in a central region for the transit through the SCS, which would ultimately ensure control of this space by the Chinese navy.

### Map 1: chain of islands according to liu hiaqing's strategy



Source: Jamestown Foundation, 2017

<sup>12</sup> A2 capabilities such as those that aim to prevent the enemy from entering a certain operational area, the main targets being air and sea forces through long-range weapons. AD operations aim to limit the capacity of enemy forces in this theater, being short-range weapons, such as mines, surface-to-air missiles, coastal artillery, etc. Therefore, some types of weapons that refer to the A2 function are anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-satellite and submarine weapons (nuclear and conventional).

**Map 2: strategic triangle of the scs**

Source: CATAMA, M. Asean Military Defense Review, 04/18/2015. Available at: <<http://www.aseanmildef.com/2015/04/strategic-triangle-in-south-china-sea.html>>.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the rise to power of Xi Jinping (2013-) as leader of the CCP, the most assertive and expansive attitudes of the red dragon are based on the president's constantly asserted interest in the Chinese quest to regain its position<sup>13</sup>, his former status quo, in

<sup>13</sup> From the classical Chinese dynasties Qin and Han (3rd century BC - 3rd century AD), but mainly after the Tang and Song dynasties (7th century AD - 13th century AD), through trade and power asymmetry, a kind of gravitational system emerged and made China the center of East Asia, also known as the synocentric system (SPENCE, 1990). This system is a representation of Confucian thinking of hierarchy, according to which China would

the international system<sup>14</sup>. Gradually, the speech chanted by China at the beginning of the 21st century based on the peaceful rise/peaceful development<sup>15</sup> of China is no longer supported internationally, given the growing Chinese maritime assertiveness that keeps pace with the expansion of Chinese investments in the sectors of natural resources and captive markets raised by its *going global*<sup>16</sup> strategic doctrine.

According to the 2001 official document China Peaceful Development:

China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.

To ensure that their central interests are won, disputes in the SCS represent impediments to (a) Chinese territorial integrity, (b) economic and social development and (c) national security.

Japan's interests in the MSC are broadly based on a number of elements ranging from energy security to regional security architecture. Japanese national interests are widely considered to be maintaining their sovereignty and independence in order to defend its territorial integrity

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represent the "heartland", while the others would be seen as the system periphery.

<sup>14</sup> Speaking at the 13th National Congress of China in 2018, Xi Jinping stated that "We are determined to fight a bloody battle against our enemies... with a strong determination to take our place in the world" (apud JAPANTIMES, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Zheng Bijian (2003), creator of the term "peaceful rise", believes that China can emerge as a global power in an environment of peaceful coexistence. In his speech he points out that "Asia will face a rare historic opportunity for peaceful rise, and China's peaceful rise will be part of Asia's peaceful rise. (...) China, as an Asian country, will play a more active and useful role in the development, prosperity and stability of all other Asian countries, and its neighbors in particular" (BIJIAN, 2003; p. 17 apud THORTON, 2005). In 2005, the term "peaceful development" started to be used in China, first appearing in the document China's Peaceful Development Road, due to the duality of the term "ascension".

<sup>16</sup> Explained for the first time in its 10th Five-Year Plan (2000-2005), the "going global" or "going out" doctrine aimed to strengthen China's presence around the globe through the internationalization of its brands and companies, in addition to absorbing foreign know-how in order to increase the efficiency of Chinese companies and ensure the supply of natural resources to the country's industry. This movement was led by the country's large state-owned companies, known as "national champions", and as these companies consolidated international positions, the armed forces naturally experienced an impulse to guarantee the security and defense of Chinese investments and interests.

and guarantee the lives of people, the properties of Japanese national companies, and their survival.

China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development. (MOD, 2016, p. 4).

Japanese maritime interests in the SCS are: *"safeguarding the sea lines of communication (SLOC); adhering to international rules and norms, particularly the freedom of navigation; and consolidating the US-led security system in East Asia"* (KOGA, 2017, p. 2). In addition, the Japanese are concerned about possible transformations in the balance of power in the region, as Chinese maritime assertiveness and expansion towards strategic bottlenecks directly impacts the balance of power in East Asia (INOBUCHI; PANDA, 2018). According to Koda (2017, p. 4), *"China is challenging the status quo in East Asia and attempting to expand its sphere of influence through occasional unilateral action"*, as we will see below when dealing with territorial disputes in the SCS<sup>17</sup>.

It is noted that, when dealing with the MSC in relation to Japan and, mainly, China, we need to take into account that the asymmetries of power, especially from the military point of view, allow the existence of the strategic dispute between both countries for the maintenance or transformation of the balance of power in the region. To some extent, as we will see later, Chinese pressure on the SCS tensions security in East Asia and Japanese strategic interests.

## 2. TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE SCS AND CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS

As seen in the previous section, the large volumes and values of international trade that transit through the sea routes of Southeast Asia, the presence of strategic and food resources such as oil and fish, in addition to its semi-closed geography make the SCS a high voltage board for the dispute between states. In addition, the fact that the regional economies

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<sup>17</sup> In the third part of this article we aim to detail Japan's strategies and strategic interests in the SCS.

of Southeast Asia are among the fastest growing in the world today is also a factor of aggravation of this situation. There is a dispute between major powers in the region, precisely between China and the US-Japan alliance. China aims to legitimize its territorial claims and ensure its security, while the United States and Japan operate in the SCS in order to preserve their economic and strategic interests by balancing Chinese ascension, since neither country has territorial conflicts in the region.

Historically, the main litigants in the SCS are: China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines and territorial disputes will be concentrated in the areas of the Paracels, Spratlys Islands and the Scarborough shoal. The following map overlaps the demands for maritime-territorial sovereignty of each of these states with the areas of interest mentioned and it is possible to perceive the almost perfect identification between these two factors.

**Map 3: demands of sovereignty and areas of interest**



Source: Voice of America. Available at: <http://blogs.voanews.com/state-department-news/2012/07/27/is-china-overplaying-its-hand-in-the-south-china-sea/>

The conjuncture of conflicts around the Paracels and Spratlys archipelagos dates back to the 19th century during the Sino-French War of 1884-85. In this confrontation, China objected to the French desire to incorporate the islands into the territory of its Indochina colony. The resolution of the conflict ensured that France recognized Chinese sovereignty over maritime formations, while Imperial China accepted French sovereignty over Indochina. During World War II, Japan took control of the islands and placed them under Taiwan's jurisdiction. With the end of the conflict, South Vietnam reopened the old French garrison in Paracels, renewing disputes in the region. However, it was only in 1974 that a confrontation between China and South Vietnam took a course. The Battle of Paracels took place on January 19, 1974 when Vietnamese troops attempted to invade Duncan Island, which is in the Paracels, where they were repelled by Chinese artillery, a naval battle ensued and was won by the Chinese (HAYTON, 2014).

The following day, three Vietnamese installations at Paracels were bombed, forcing Saigon to surrender and soon ensuring *de facto* control of Beijing over the archipelago, which is sustained to this day (TAYLOR, 2008). After Vietnam's unification in 1975, Hanoi incorporated Saigon's old demand for control of the islands, so that currently the country does not recognize Chinese sovereignty and attests that both the Paracels and the Spratlys archipelago are historically linked to their national development, which would legitimize Vietnamese sovereignty over the region. In addition to the dispute between China and Vietnam, another player that claims dominance over these formations is Taiwan, which finds an argument in the fact that these islands have already been under its jurisdiction (FERNANDES, 2018).

Regarding the Spratlys archipelago specifically, it consists of approximately 190 formations spread over a space of 450 thousand km<sup>2</sup>, thus being the main area of interstate dispute within the SCS. In addition to the aforementioned China, Vietnam and Taiwan that claim sovereignty over the entire area of the Spratlys, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines also enter into the dispute. These countries base their demands and arguments on the prerogatives put forward by UNCLOS since 1982. Since the convention granted that islands capable of supporting human life could constitute EEZs, it motivated a race for this space occupation. Unsurprisingly, the incidence of military disputes among coastal states increases (HAYTON, 2014; FERNANDES, 2018).

Military skirmishes on the Spratlys first took place in 1988<sup>18</sup> when the Chinese navy expelled Vietnamese<sup>19</sup> garrisons and took control of seven formations on the Spratlys. Then, in 1995, Philippine protests against the construction of Chinese military facilities on the shoal of Mischief (an atoll in the eastern area of the Spratlys located about 250 km from the Philippine island of Palawan) once again led to conflict in the region, which was only resolved with the ASEAN expedition of the “Joint Declaration of Consultations on the South China Sea and other areas of cooperation”. Finally, in 1999, the construction of an infrastructure on the Mischief shoal led to further protests from Manila. However, ASEAN did not reach unanimity and China left the situation without reprisals (FERNANDES, 2018).

Finally, the Scarborough shoal is the SCS’s newest interstate dispute area. The set consisting of a variety of shoals, sand banks and rocks extends over a perimeter of 49 km and its main strategic value lies in its position in relation to the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos (SCS’s Strategic Triangle). According to a 2016 arbitration by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), the Scarborough shoal is located within the Philippine EEZ, thus being an area of its sovereignty. Since 2012, under arguments of environmental preservation, the Chinese Navy has installed a warship at the entrance to the inner shoal lagoon, preventing Filipino fishermen from accessing the area with the largest fish catch (AMTI, 2016). Given the shoal’s proximity to the Philippine island of Luzon and the PCA’s verdict, the US has been announcing that Scarborough is the “red line” with respect to Chinese advances in the SCS. Therefore, Beijing has shown caution in starting any type of construction in this area. Even so, the Chinese recently declared they have plans to build an environmental monitoring station on the shoal (JOCELYN, 2017; FERNANDES, 2018).

Due to interstate conflicts in the SCS and the asymmetry of power between the countries of Southeast Asia and China, ASEAN appears as a valuable instrument to counter the Chinese presence in the region. Beginning in the 1990s, taking advantage of the fact that Beijing normalized its diplomatic relations with all governments in the region, ASEAN sought to gradually integrate China<sup>20</sup> into its talks, including

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<sup>18</sup> South Johnson Reef Skirmish.

<sup>19</sup> Currently, Vietnam is the state that controls the largest number of lands in the Spratlys, followed by China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. Of these, only the Sultanate of Brunei does not have military facilities in the area.

<sup>20</sup> This strategy became known as Constructive engagement. Pereira (2004, p. 7) clarifies:

those concerning regional security issues. Thus, these countries sought to stop Chinese advances on the SCS through multilateralism.

The first example of this came in 1992 when ASEAN and China approved the *“Declaration on the South China Sea”*, which stipulated that disputes in the region should be resolved by peaceful means. However, the declaration did not prevent China and the Philippines from starting the first conflict on the Mischief shoal in 1995. After new disputes broke out on the Spratlys between the two countries in 1999, the Chinese agreed on the need to establish a code of conduct for the region in order to avoid future conflicts. Historically averse to multilateralism, Beijing feared the internationalization of the SCS issue and was forced to retreat. As a result, in 2002 the *“Declaration between countries on Conduct in the South China Sea”* was signed, defining that an effort was required to develop a *“Code of Conduct in the South China Sea”* (HAYTON, 2014).

It should be noted, however, that none of these agreements has binding force. Therefore, none of the players is legally required to comply with its guidelines, so much so that Beijing continues to create and occupy new islands. Regardless of approving regional agreements, China reinforces its demands on the SCS through internal and unilateral laws such as the *“Decree of the President of the People’s Republic of China No. 55”* or *“Territorial Waters and Adjacent Areas Act”* of 1992. The Asian giant also disarms its rivals through bilateralism based mainly on the asymmetry of economic capacities, as explained in the *“Banana War”* with the Philippines and with the loans made to Cambodia. This is an important issue to rethink the effects on regionalism in the region. That is why regional countries are finding it difficult to present a united front against China, which prefers to deal with each capital bilaterally. In June 2011, for example, ASEAN failed to issue a final statement after Cambodia refused to endorse the language that criticized and referred to the countries’ recent naval stalemates with China (PILLING et al, 2012).

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“This new approach started with the invitation made to the then Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Qian Qichen, to participate, as a guest, in the 1991 ASEAN Ministerial meeting. This was followed by the 1992 ASEAN Summit, whose Final Declaration expressed the interest in associating China in the dialogue with ASEAN countries on security matters. On the other hand, the change in the balance of forces on the international scene with the end of the Cold War, which determined the need to develop new means and ways of dealing with security issues, was the main reason invoked by ASEAN for the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ASEAN Regional Forum – ARF), in 1994, with participation extended to a series of Asian (including China) and non-Asian countries”.

The episode of the Philippine maritime guard's retreat from the Scarborough shoal after Beijing rejected more than 150 banana shipments (estimated at U\$ 760,000) demonstrates how China has used its economic weight as an instrument of regional policy. Another example of this can be seen when Cambodia, in refusing to condemn the Chinese occupation actions in the SCS, aborted the possibility of China being punished within the ASEAN scope (FERNANDES, 2018). One of the main reasons for this position is likely to have been the U\$ 2.7 billion in loans that Beijing provided to Phnom Penh. Blackwill & Harris (2016, p. 112) contribute to the argument:

China's leverage in the region is helped by strong bilateral trade levels. Trade between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reached \$350 billion in 2013; in that year bilateral trade reached \$36.4 billion with the Philippines, \$40 billion with Vietnam, and \$60 billion with Indonesia. China's emergence as the most important trade and investment partner for virtually all of Southeast Asia lends a preemptive, foreshadowing quality to any geoeconomically coercive threats Beijing may issue. Vietnam, for instance, has softened its approach to territorial claims with China as a result of watching what happened to the Philippines. China's economic hold over Vietnam is such that Hanoi remains more vulnerable than Manila to Chinese coercion: Vietnam is highly dependent upon the PRC for rubber, and major Chinese imports are used in the goods Vietnam ultimately exports. Unlike the Philippines, Vietnam does not enjoy a mutual defense treaty with the United States. Perhaps not coincidentally, China's claims in the South China Sea are particularly aggressive toward Vietnam, threatening 70 percent of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (BLACKWILL & HARRIS, 2016, p. 112).

Due to the asymmetries in economic and military capabilities between the Southeast Asian states and China, it was concluded that the latter has a central role in the SCS political definition. Therefore, the increase in Chinese assertiveness in the region since the second half of the 1970s has become an issue of growing concern for local powers, especially given that even when united in the ASEAN format, Beijing succeeds in

undermining unanimity<sup>21</sup> among members through economic pressure in their bilateral relationship. In this way, the support of extraregional states, such as Japan and the USA, in strengthening ASEAN's positions vis-à-vis China cannot be underestimated.

### 3. THE JAPANESE REAPPROXIMATION TO THE SCS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

According to Inoguchi and Panda (2018, p. 2), some principles that currently govern and guide Japanese foreign policies for the SCS region, are: the Japanese interest in keeping unchanged the distribution of power in its regional surroundings; Tokyo's attention is strictly related to American behavior and its interests in the geographic area; and the contemporary interests associated with the new political leaders who aim at a more participatory Japanese foreign policy on the international scenario.

It is noted that one of the central points that influence the increasingly significant participation of Japan in the region are the goals of Shinzo Abe's government (2012- current) and his interests in transforming the archipelago into a "Normal State"<sup>22</sup>. The transformation of Japanese strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been permeated by the desire for an external and internal balance capable of containing Chinese advances on the SCS and ECS. Since the beginning of Abe's government, the archipelago has been aiming to strengthen relations with the United States, to demand changes in its strategic culture and to increase its military presence on boards that it stopped participating after the end of the Second World War.

Under the idea of an insecure regional scenario, the Japanese government has managed to transform some of its security policies. In 2013 the Japanese government created the National Security Council, which aims to provide a forum to engage in strategic discussions on various national security issues. Also, in 2014, the Abe cabinet decided to suspend Japan's self-imposed ban on arms exports, and this stimulus encouraged Japan's trade and cooperation with countries in the SCS.

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<sup>21</sup> Decision-making within ASEAN only happens if unanimity among its members is achieved.

<sup>22</sup> Since the end of World War II (1945), Japan has rebuilt itself in accordance with American dictates that have intensified a process of demilitarization in the country through constitutional prerogatives and American control.

First, no weapons can be exported to countries under United Nations Security Council sanctions, such as North Korea and Iran. Second, defense exports, especially those with a joint research and development component, with such countries as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, India, and some Southeast Asian countries can be allowed by the Japanese government's decision as long as they are deemed to contribute to Japan's security. Third, weapons exports are allowed only when the governments of importing countries are obligated to abide by an agreement governing the use of the technology (INOGUCHI; PANDA, 2018, p. 7).

In addition, in 2015 the Japanese government was able to modify the interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and increased the capabilities of the Self-Defense Forces<sup>23</sup>. Thus, Japan effectively adopted the principles of "Collective Self-Defense", which despite being legitimized by the UN Charter in Article 51, were not followed by the Japanese due to the restrictions of its security policy. With the new interpretation, Japan legitimizes the use of force or the right to act with the use of force in case of a direct attack on the country or on an allied nation if there is a threat to Japan's survival.

Regarding territorial disputes, the Japanese government understands that any modification or decision regarding territorial sovereignty of certain territories in favor of China, may directly affect the Japanese claim in the SCS. During Defense Minister Onodera Itsumori's visit to Manila in June 2013, the official said that both the Philippines and Japan faced similar situations. That is why the Japanese government is very concerned that this type of situation in the SCS may affect the situation in the ECS (apud DRIFTE, 2016, p. 14).

Furthermore, in an article written by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe entitled "Asia Security Diamond" published in 2012, he argues about concerns on the SCS and China as a threat. In the Japanese leader's argument, the SCS is a deep enough sea for Chinese military forces to be able to use submarines to strengthen their presence in the region (ABE, 2012). In the strategy presented by the Japanese Prime Minister,

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<sup>23</sup> In 1954, the government enacted the SDF Act and converted the National Security Force into the Self-Defense Forces under Law No. 165 of 1952 into the Self-Defense Forces Act (or Law). They were created with the interest of defending the Japanese territory from possible threats and also providing help in case of natural disasters.

Australia, India, Japan and Hawaii (USA) should form an alliance capable of safeguarding maritime territory in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. This strategy would be a response to pressure and strategy for China's seas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Abe (2012), as Japan is a democracy of a maritime nature, it is reasonable to choose partners that can reflect the need for protection of the seas (ABE, 2012). Through such a strategy aimed at the most prominent and powerful countries in the region, the alliance with countries in Southeast Asia becomes a support mechanism to protect and safeguard the essential maritime routes for the Japanese archipelago.

The interests of the Japanese government and the gradual resurgence of defense policies have allowed Japan greater flexibility in its foreign policy and in its actions together with the USA to protect strategic routes outside its immediate regional environment (Northeast Asia). In addition, since 2011, Japan has experienced a challenge for its energy security due to the nuclear incident in Fukushima<sup>24</sup>, in which public opinion and politics in Japan led to a reduction in the country's dependence on nuclear energy but increasing its dependence on fossil fuels (INOBUCHI; PANDA, 2018).

With regard to energy security, in a document of 2007, when Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Taro Aso presented the main aspects for Japanese energy security and how it would be linked to the country's economic and sustainable growth. In this sense, Taro points out that the Japanese perspective of energy security would be linked to the security of resources, energy and the environment (ASO, 2007).

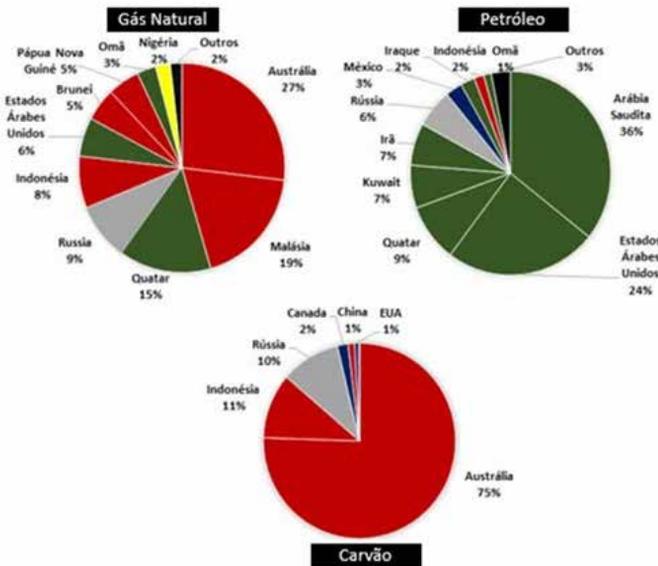
In 2017, Fumio Kishida, Japan's former foreign minister, gave a speech on the archipelago's resource and energy diplomacy, where he emphasized five points that would be the pillars to ensure Japanese energy security. The five points can be summarized in: promoting free trade and investments in energy and resources, accelerating efforts to stimulate Japan's access to energy, reducing environmental costs and improving energy efficiency, promoting the development and use of alternative sources of energy, and increasing global governance for emergency situations (KISHIDA, 2017). These objectives are related to the preservation of the free navigation of oceans and, consequently, to

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<sup>24</sup> On March 11 2011 a tsunami of magnitude greater than 8.7 hit the seas of Japan, causing a tsunami that hit the Fukushima plant and caused the meltdown of three nuclear reactors. Since the Japanese protests incident, the use of nuclear energy has become one of the problems on the Japanese political agenda in the face of public opinion.

the Japanese interests in maintaining the balance of power in the SCS and strengthening ties with countries in the SCS. Due to the Fukushima incident, the Japanese energy self-sufficiency rate decreased considerably from 20.2% in 2010, to just 6.4% in 2014, reaching 8.3% in 2016. As Japan depends on about 86% of oil coming from the Middle East and most of its imports of natural gas and coal are from East Asian countries, Japan depends on free trade maritime routes (GRAPH 1). In 2016 alone, Japan imported 1.23 billion barrels of oil, 109.87 million tons of coal and 83.34 million tons of natural gas (METI, 2017).

**Graphic 1: percentage of japan's imports by country in 2016**



Source: Autores' elaboration based on METI data (2017).

With the need to ensure strategic routes and resources to meet their needs, the Japanese government gradually needs to direct more and more efforts to strengthen relations with countries in the SCS, aiming to balance Chinese influence and expansion in the region and guarantee free navigation of the seas.

While the US and Australia can provide the muscle in terms of military hardware and alliance support

to deter China, ASEAN provides critical political support and legitimacy to Japan's efforts to balance against China's rise. (...) if not only Vietnam and the Philippines but all ASEAN members begin to express common security concerns over China's maritime actions, this would be a diplomatic achievement that would strengthen Tokyo's strategic interests and its diplomatic clout in the region (NILSSON-WRIGHT; FUJIWARA, 2015, p. 10).

From a multilateral point of view, Japan has been promoting assistance and investing in SCS countries through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), as well as seeking to encourage greater openness of ASEAN to other members operating in the region. In the second case, during the *East Asia Summit* in Bali, former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda (2011-2012) proposed the expansion of the ASEAN Maritime Forum to include more members, such as the USA (DRIFTE, 2016).

In the case of development cooperation, Japan has traditionally supported coastal countries in the SCS as part of its policy to strengthen relations and cooperation with ASEAN countries, stimulating the development of the region. In this sense,

as important markets, sources for raw materials and destination of Japanese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the littoral states of the SCS and the members of ASEAN in general have been and continue to be major recipients of Japanese ODA (Official Development Assistance), be it loans, grants or technical aid" (DRIFTE, 2016, p. 13).

Despite Japanese efforts at the multilateral level, it is noted that not all Southeast Asian countries feel threatened by Chinese pressure, given that not all have territorial disputes with China. Therefore, the positioning of the Philippines and Cambodia, their perceptions of the Asian giant as a threat, are divergent. Tensions in the region have increased and opinions within ASEAN have diverged even though they all aim at the same common denominator – peace and stability in the region.

As such, the Japanese government is channeling efforts into bilateral relations with SCS countries. Official documents from the Japanese government, such as the National Defense Program Guidelines

launched in 2014, present Japan's concern with Southeast Asian countries, stating the need to strengthen relations between the archipelago and SCS countries through the active promotion of training and joint exercises with and strengthening of other countries (MOD, 2014).

Shinzo Abe, in a text scheduled to be addressed during his visit to Jakarta in 2013, exposed the guiding principles of Japanese diplomacy. The five principles would be: the protection of freedom of thought, expression and speech in the region; to ensure that the oceans are governed by laws and rules, and not by force (in which the prime minister praises the North American strategy of rebalancing for Asia); to pursue the strengthening of economic relations between Japan and other countries, to stimulate cultural relations between countries and, finally; to promote exchange between young generations. Therefore, it is clear that this document emphasizes not only the Japanese interest in bringing Japan closer to the ASEAN countries, but also with the second principle, there is an indirect mention of Chinese maritime assertiveness (MOFA, 2013a).

Among the countries with territorial disputes with China, two deserve to be highlighted due to their geopolitical and geostrategic importance for Japan and for the maintenance of power distribution in East Asia: the Philippines and Vietnam. Therefore, these are the preferred targets of Tokyo's foreign policy.

## ● PHILIPPINES

According to Storey (2013, p. 152), among ASEAN member countries Japan "has focused particular attention on building closer relations with the Philippines, for two reasons. First, since the late 2000s, the Philippines has been at the forefront of the dispute with China (followed closely by Vietnam). Second, the Philippines is a treaty ally of the US, and Tokyo has pledged to improve ties with US allies.

In 2011, in the Joint Communication between Japan and the Philippines, countries agreed to promote a strategic partnership and strengthen cooperation in maritime security. A few weeks later, countries opened the Maritime Dialogue between the Philippines and Japan, encouraging exchanges and training between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces and the Philippine Coast Guard (MOFA, 2011).

Chinese assertiveness had direct consequences for Japanese action outside its regional surroundings, gaining legitimacy and

confidence to act in regions without being seen as an imperialist player. A good example of this is the speech by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines in an interview to the Financial Times, where he said that Japan's attitude to transform its constitution and become a player capable of balancing Chinese power in the region (apud PILLING et al, 2012). In the same year, both countries signed a five-year cooperation agreement, when Japan provided 12 patrol ships to the Philippine coast guard through loans and financial assistance.

In 2015, the Japanese government supported the decision by the Southeast Asian country to take to the ICJ their objections about the expansive Chinese actions in the SCS. In 2016, when the Court ruled in favor of Manila against Chinese claims, the Japanese Foreign Minister was in favor of compliance with the law, stating that Japan expected the countries to comply with the decision and that such actions would take the peaceful resolution of disputes in the SCS (MOFA, 2016a). Also in 2015, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces engaged in joint training with the Philippine Navy in order to increase maritime security cooperation between the two countries.

In 2016, the Philippines and Japan signed a new security agreement that allows the transfer of defense technology and equipment from Japan to the Philippines, further increasing bilateral security relations (MOFA, 2016b).

## ● VIETNAM

Since 2014 the deterioration of relations between China and Vietnam has stimulated the process of approximation between the country of Southeast Asia and the Japanese archipelago. With the *"oil rig, flanked by scores of civilian, coast guard, and naval vessels, into an area off the disputed Paracel Islands, relations between Vietnam and China hit their lowest point since the two countries fought a war in 1979-1983"* (INOGUCHI; PANDA, 2018, p. 11).

In the same year, the Japanese government, with the visit of Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida to Hanoi, offered the Vietnamese government to sell patrol ships for US\$ 5 million. In addition, Tokyo has agreed to provide training and equipment to help Hanoi increase its maritime patrolling capabilities (INOGUCHI; PANDA, 2018).

In 2017, during one of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visits to Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Phuc of Vietnam expressed appreciation

of Japan's active importance in territorial disputes in the SCS and in maritime security in Vietnam through the promotion of trade and the transfer of armaments and technologies for the country (MOFA, 2017). Recently, the two countries met at the 6th Defense Policy Dialogue and gradually they have been speaking for the increase of their relations through, for example, maritime assistance, cooperation agreements of their coast guards (PARAMESWARAN, 2018).

During a visit by the Vietnamese Armed Forces (VPA) delegation to Japan in June 2018, a Vietnamese military officer granted an interview to The Sankei Shimbun and Japan Forward stating that *"I hope Japan [will] reform Article 9 and get involved more actively for our region's security"* (apud OKADA, 2018). The official's statement even endorses an argument that some of the countries in Southeast Asia have been aiming for greater Japanese military participation despite an imperialist past.

## CONCLUSION

Due to its strategic resources, commercial importance and geographical characteristics, the South China Sea is one of the most tense and competitive geopolitical boards today. Still, the presence of a large power, China, amidst several other small and medium-sized powers is definitely a factor that increases regional instability, since it hinders the efficient balance of state capacities.

Considering that there is a territorial dispute in the SCS and at the same time a dispute for regional power, this article started from a geopolitical analysis to understand the importance of the region for Japan. In this sense, we debated about the geography and maritime capabilities in the region, the living and non-living mineral and natural resources, the political-military interests and the strategies of the countries involved in the Asian theater. Therefore, with regard to Chinese geostrategy, it was observed that it aims to defend and project regional power simultaneously. After all, the construction of artificial islands in the SCS, especially in the areas of the Paracels, the Spratlys islands and the Scarborough shoal, aims to create a space of exclusion where the arbiter to determine who will enter the South Sea will be none other than Beijing. At the same time, the consolidation of privileged positions in this maritime space allows the Chinese to project more easily to other areas of interest in the SCS, such as, the strait of Malacca and Taiwan.

In this sense, the achievement of China's objectives directly threatens the regional status quo, but it also has consequences that go beyond the scope of Southeast Asia, especially with regard to free navigation in Mediterranean regions and sovereignty over disputed islands. For this reason, the interstate disputes within the SCS scope also attract the attention of powers that are not directly involved in these conflicts.

Gradually, Japan has transformed its stance on the international scene in the face of external pressure and due to the interests of some leaders in strengthening its image in the world. Since the Shinzo Abe government (2012-present), Japan has consolidated close relations with the ASEAN countries, so that in the first year of his mandate and on his first international trip, still in January 2013, Abe visited Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia (MOFA, 2013b).

As the Prime Minister himself said in 2013 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "Japan is back". The Chinese assertiveness and the concerns of the Japanese archipelago about the threat from China in the face of disputes in the SCS and the ECS incite the concerns of the Japanese government (MOFA, 2013a). After all, any change in the status quo at the SCS could affect Japan's dispute with China on the ECS, and vice versa.

The article aimed to demonstrate the interests of the Japanese archipelago in the SCS and how Japanese strategies have been directed to the region. With Chinese assertiveness in the SCS and disagreements with Southeast Asian countries, Japan has achieved legitimacy and confidence to act outside its scope, which has been restricted since the end of World War II (1945). As mentioned by Pilling et al. (2012), *"Beijing has long raised the spectre of a return of Japanese militarism. The attitude towards Japanese rearmament in the Philippines, itself colonized by Japan, suggests regional fears of an assertive China may be beginning to trump memories of Japan's aggressive wartime actions"* .

In 2018, for the first time a Japanese submarine participated in training/patrolling at the SCS and this act can be seen as a message to China, representing Japan's support for some Southeast Asian countries and the USA. At the end of the year, Japan's new defense guidelines were launched, raising concerns about its strategic environment and, mainly, with the Chinese incursions in the SCS and ECS. In the new program, it is estimated that the Japanese government will be able to purchase aircraft carriers and cruise missiles and military spending is likely to exceed

the 1% ceiling, a transformation in the archipelago's security policy and strategic culture (MOD, 2018).

It is concluded, then, that Japan has gradually been able to act in theaters that it has stopped participating actively since the end of the Second World War. The SCS is an important strategic board for the Japanese archipelago, which has increasingly managed to advance its pieces, strengthening ties with countries that once saw it as a threat and today see it as a potential balancer and ally.

# O RAIAR DO SOL NO SUDESTE ASIÁTICO: A PROJEÇÃO JAPONESA NO MAR DO SUL DA CHINA E SEUS INTERESSES ESTRATÉGICOS

## RESUMO

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A emergência de conflitos territoriais no Mar do Sul da China (MSC) tem impulsionado não só a disputa entre potências regionais e extrarregionais, como um debate amplo sobre soberania e assimetria de poder na região. Considerando a crescente participação do arquipélago japonês no MSC, este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a atuação dele e seus interesses estratégicos no teatro marítimo do Sudeste Asiático por meio de uma análise geopolítica. A hipótese do artigo é que como o MSC é um espaço de interesse estratégico japonês, qualquer alteração no status quo da região pode representar um risco para as rotas vitais de comunicação e comerciais do Japão e para a configuração de poder no Mar do Leste; por isso, o arquipélago tem se aproximado de países no Sudeste Asiático com o intuito de balancear o poder chinês. O artigo conclui que o MSC é uma área central para o arquipélago nipônico do ponto de vista militar e econômico e que a assertividade chinesa tem permitido a atuação do Japão no Sudeste Asiático e incentivado a cooperação militar com alguns países no MSC (como Filipinas e Vietnã).

**Palavras-chave:** Mar do Sul da China. Japão. Geopolítica. Estudos Estratégicos.

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