

Taiwan – A Strategic Trigger Point in the South China Sea: Impacts on Western Pacific Security

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Abstract

South China Sea (SCS) stands as a critical geopolitical hotspot, fraught with historical territorial disputes and escalating tensions among powerful nations, posing a significant threat to regional stability. Geo-political and geo-strategic environment of SCS is shaped by Taiwan conflict. Strategic community of US and China would resort to every possible option to stay away from war. However, as military theorists said the best way to avoid the war is to demonstrate war. Along with this intent both China & US continuously enlarging military capabilities in SCS convincing each other not to go for the option of military conflict. This study aims to investigate genesis of Taiwan conflict, disputing claims of various actors, and drivers of US involvement. The significance of this research lies in its analysis to holistically cover the implications for Western Pacific strategic environment. Theoretical framework entails theory of strategic triangle whereas the methodology is qualitative in nature. Ultimately, research underscores imperative of proactive diplomacy and crisis management strategies to mitigate risks of conflict. It concludes by advocating for preservation of international norms and exploration of alternative security frameworks to uphold peace and stability in South China Sea.

Keywords: Taiwan; China; United States; South China Sea; Sovereignty; Strategic Stability

Introduction

South China Sea (SCS), because of its richness of resources and being one of the busiest maritime traffic routes, figures out as an arena of significant geopolitical influence (Seth, 2024). It presents itself as confluence of great powers political interest and crossroad of critical waterways bridging Indian and Pacific Oceans. The abundance of natural resources, as per the estimation - 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of untapped oil increase the significance of SCS (Rani, 2025). It has witnessed antagonizing geopolitical competition and disputed territorial claims amongst China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The disputes, mostly rooted in partial or complete claim over Exclusive Economic

Zones. As per the statistics, SCS states have constructed over 90 outposts across 70 sites, transforming reefs and rocks into strategic islands to assert territorial control (Bucholz, 2024).

The unresolved sovereignty dispute remains a significant driver of tensions and reason to consider Taiwan as a flashpoint in SCS. The region became a perilous bedrock after the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's to Taipei in August 2022 (Willian Yang, 2022). It triggered a new volatile status in cross-strait and US-China relations. In fact, China considered Speaker Pelosi's visit a provocation towards Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis. Consequently, since August 2022 China conducted a number of military drills around the island (Bonny Lin, 2023). As a matter of fact, China has persistently maintained its diplomatic stance that any interaction of foreign powers with Taipei is an interference into China's internal affairs and has warned the US "that interfering with Taiwan's future is the first red line in Sino-US relations" (Tan, 2023). Despite US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping meeting in November 2023 aimed to ease the escalating diplomatic tensions, key factors of friction, including the status of Taiwan, remain unresolved (Aljazeera, 2024).

In global affairs, those geographic areas are seen as flashpoints that could potentially erupt into violent conflict. They represent regions characterized by volatility influenced by historical legacies, competing interests and contradicting ideologies where an event of little significance has the potential escalate into a widespread conflict. The brewing tensions between China and Taiwan in SCS, accentuated by unresolved territorial and sovereignty claims in SCS and a stiffening Sino-US rivalry complicates the SCS mosaic that can be reverberated ramifications beyond the region if disturbed. In the prevailing uncertain and potentially volatile environment this research seeks to analyse prospects of Taiwan as a flashpoint in SCS dissecting the historical evolution of Taiwan dispute leading to current crisis stage. Furthermore, the research assesses the security dynamics in western pacific region with respect to Taiwan from the perspectives of US and China, and how interplay between stakeholders influence the regional security dynamics. Furthermore, the research examines the strategic order that could disrupt and have serious kind of ramifications for the peace, stability, and security of the region and the global economy.

In order to understand Taiwan conflict and relationship with China and US - the theory of strategic triangle has been applied (Dittmer, 1981). Theory of strategic triangle is used to analyze complex dynamics, it provides insight to understand relations and interactions among three key state actors. According to Dittmer's formulation of strategic triangle, several criteria must be met to apply this theory effectively (Dittmer, 1981). In case of Taiwan conflict; China, US and Taiwan can be considered rational and autonomous actors, each pursuing its own interests and strategies in SCS. The bilateral relationships among any two of three actors are contingent upon their relationship with third actor. In other words, dynamics between China & Taiwan,

China & US and Taiwan & US are interlinked and influenced by each other. Each actor seeks to cooperate with one or both of other actors to optimize its own interests. The pursuit of interests often involves strategic calculations and maneuvers to maintain or enhance one's position vis-à-vis the others.

Historical Evolution of the Taiwan Crisis

While Chinese history scales centuries, however, the China known today stems from the creation of The Republic of China proclaimed in 1912 after the fall of Manchu Qing dynasty (Babb, 2023). The political brawl between Chiang Kai-shek led National Party (Koumingtang) and Mao Zedong led Chinese Communist Party resulted in creation of Peoples Republic of China in 1949 (Kuo-tai, 1989). Chiang Kai-shek with about 2 million of his supporters and national treasures, withdrew to the island of Taiwan, announced the transfer of the capital to Taipei, and proclaimed the continuation of the rule over the whole of China. In essence, retreat of Chiang Kai-shek and his followers to Taiwan marked beginning of Taiwan issue. After their retreat to Taiwan, KMT maintained its claims as the legitimate government of all of China including Taiwan. Martial law was declared and Taiwan experienced decades of authoritarian rule. The US supported KMT both diplomatically and militarily, viewing Taiwan as a bulwark against the spread of communism in East Asia.

However, in early 1970s, geopolitical landscape got changed after normalizing relations between the US and China. The US and many other countries recognized PRC as the legitimate government. However, both Taiwan and China claim to be the sole legitimate government of Taiwan. According to Taipei's official stance, it is already an independent state as Republic of China (Taiwan). Whereas China's official stance, "there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory" (Jash, 2024). The United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 25 Oct 1971 recognized Peoples Republic of China as "the only legitimate representative of China to the UN" (American Institute in Taiwan, 1975). The relationship between Taiwan and China remained complex as political difficulties persist despite expansion of economic and cultural relations. As per statistics, trade volume between China and Taiwan is expected to be around \$170 billion in 2025 (Ma, 2024).

Geo-Political Environment of South China Sea (SCS):

- **Geo-Strategic Significance of Taiwan**

Taiwan's location makes it a strategic linchpin with significant military value in SCS, an area of territorial conflicts and geopolitical tensions. It serves as a gateway to the Pacific. Military of Taiwan has strategic edge to affect regional security by disrupting important SLOCs (Ting-yu, 2024). Taiwan's armed forces provide a credible deterrence due to their cutting edge

technology and trained manpower. Taiwan's location allows it to monitor action along this crucial maritime route and adjust its response, which affects the security dynamics of SCS.

- **Economic Significance of Taiwan**

Taiwan has emerged as a significant player in SCS due to its vibrant and export-oriented economy. Its industrial foundation is diverse, with sectors like technology, electronics and manufacturing. It is a major participant in global supply chain, particularly in semiconductor industry. In 2025, Taiwan's GDP is estimated to be 25.5 trillion New Taiwan dollars or 793.2 bn US dollars (Textor, 2025). The economic consequences of Taiwan conflict might be much dire as it is world's leading producers of high-end semi-conductors. A disruption in that supply could have cascading effects for global economy. It has ripple effects throughout the global economy (Patey, 2024).

- **Sovereignty Claims and Territorial Disputes in SCS**

Sovereignty declarations and territorial differences in SCS are major source of concern for regional and major powers of the world. China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan had overlapping claims to contested areas rich in resources that are also vital for maritime trade. China's territorial claims are based on its "Nine-Dash Line" map, asserting historical rights over around 90% of SCS (Beech, 2016). Military build-ups, occasional maritime skirmishes and forceful acts further aggravate the tensions in SCS. In this regard, construction of artificial islands, presence of naval warships and military installation make the problem more challenging. International efforts to settle disputes involve diplomatic talks and appeal to multilateral forums. In 2016, an international tribunal ruled that the map provided no legal basis for Beijing's claim, however China refuses to accept it and continues to insist on the line's legitimacy (Tom Phillips, 2016). The artificial islands being created by China, particularly in the Paracel Islands and Spratly islands, are scattered across the SCS in such a way that the Chinese can leapfrog aircraft from one airbase to next and thus command the skies over whole SCS. It includes – Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Gaven Reef and Hughes Reef etc (Davenport, 2018).

- **US – Taiwan Strategic Relations**

Taiwan issue dominated SCS geopolitics, with US and other vital stakeholders playing crucial roles. The US has keen interest in region, providing Taiwan with military hardware and diplomatic support. According to Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, the US is providing an insurance to Taiwan for defensive, cultural, and commercial relations after the US substituted diplomatic recognition to China (American Institute in Taiwan, 1979). As per the law, the US has to support Taiwan through military arms and maintain the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, the US and Taiwan maintain close relations that include arms sales and security cooperation even though the US doesn't formally recognize Taiwan's sovereignty. Since

1950, the US has sold to Taiwan approximately of \$50 bn defense equipment (Jonathan Masters, 2024). And in 2024, the Biden administration approved \$571.3m worth defense assistance to Taiwan. These acts of support by US to Taiwan irritated China. And, these have damaged the US-China relations because China sees any foreign involvement in Taiwan dispute as meddling in its internal affairs. With conflicting territorial claims, militarization of islands and strategic interest intersections, the SCS has become a flashpoint of geopolitical tensions. The US is a major player in this complex situation and has been increasing its presence & involvement in SCS.

Dynamics Influencing US Engagement in SCS

- **Countering China's Expansionism**

In order to manage its strategic interests in the SCS, US Navy regularly conducts Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations in Taiwan Strait. Though US has not ratified UNCLOS, it has amply demonstrated its intent to preserve FON in international waters being one of the fundamental factors behind its involvement in SCS. The area is a vital maritime entry point for international trade, so any disruptions might have a big impact on the US and global economy. USN often engages in FONOPs to contest Chinese maritime claims that it considers to uphold the idea of access to the world's commons. In his article, Robert S. Ross mentions "high profile and frequent FONOPS in close proximity to Chinese reclaimed territories in the SCS seek to make clear, to both Beijing and America's security partners, that the US will resist Chinese challenges to the maritime status quo and that it will fulfill its commitments to defend its allies (Ross, 2022)."

He also emphasizes the US role in enforcing international maritime law and thwarting efforts to restrict access to vital sea lanes. By taking such steps, the US demonstrates its commitment to upholding stability and encouraging conflict resolution in the SCS region. China contest US definition of upholding principal of freedom of navigations for rule based maritime order and terms it as an aggressive effort to contain China in the region. International community and neighboring countries are concerned about China's territorial claims and its construction of military installations on artificial islands. US sees this as a threat to its current hegemony and aims to offset China's expansionism in order to preserve its global order.

- **Alliance Commitments and Security Partnerships**

US has maintained long-standing security partnerships with major Indo-Pacific nations like Japan, South Korea and Philippines (Grossman, 2023). The strategic presence of US in the region through these partnerships plays a vital role in case of any danger to stability of SCS. Enhancing security alliances and offering security guarantees to neighboring nations in SCS is essential component of US commitment to preserve status quo. The US administrations reaffirms security commitments to friends and partners in the region through cooperative defense cooperation

agreements, intelligence sharing and joint military exercises. In order to prevent aggression and preserve the balance of power in Indo-Pacific, US is working to strengthen capacities of these nations and increase their resistance to possible threats.

- **Protecting Economic Interests**

Rich natural resources abound in SCS including fisheries, Gas, Oil, Coral Lime, high Silicate, Natural pearls, quality gem and possible hydrocarbons, US has robust economic interests in the area (Akram, 2022). It aims to safeguard its corporations' rights to explore and exploit these resources. SCS is also necessary for the free flow of trade to support US companies and the nation's economy. The US places a high priority on navigating the delicate link between securing access to SCS's resources and protecting its commercial interests while giving the recognition to enormous economic resources.

- **Deterrence and Power Projection**

The US seeks to strengthen its power projection capabilities and aim to deter possible threats by keeping a strong military presence in SCS. According to statistics, in 2023, the U.S. deployed three Carrier Strike Groups—USS Nimitz (CVN-68), USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76), and USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70)—conducting a total of six operations in the SCS (SCSPI, 2024). These missions frequently included large-scale exercises in key strategic locations, such as the Vanguard Basin and major regional shipping routes. The US has regularly carried out FONOPs to contest excessive maritime claims. In 2019, the South China Sea saw a record-breaking total of nine such missions. This deters any attempts to use force to change the status quo and shows US commitment to its allies and partners. This also deters potential friends and partners from looking for other security arrangements by reassuring them of US commitment to regional security. The presence of US military forces in SCS is essential to maintain regional peace because it strengthens alliances, discourages aggression and advances a rules-based system.

Security Ramifications for Western Pacific Region

- **Taiwan as a Triggering Factor in US – China Relations**

The US involvement in SCS has become key source of disagreement in US-China relations. Visits by US officials to Taiwan are seen by China as an unjustified interference in its domestic affairs and a clear challenge to its sovereignty. Graham Allison (former US Assistant Secretary of Defense) explains the US and China relationship in this way that they caught in a Thucydides Trap, where a minor crisis, like a collision between ships of the USN and the PLAN, escalating into a major war because of the tension between the status quo between US and China (Misenheimer, 2019). This dynamic complicates an already tense relationship and could make it more difficult to work together on global concerns like nuclear non-proliferation, pandemics, climate change and disaster relief. For example, collaboration on climate change measures may

suffer as China and US put their respective geopolitical interests in SCS ahead of joint environmental protection projects (e.g. US withdrawal from Paris Peace Agreement in 2020). Similar to this, mistrust between parties and lack of coordination resulting from increased tensions in SCS may hinder cooperation. Additionally, due to Taiwan problem, cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation programs may also be jeopardized, potentially intensify regional tensions.

- **Potential to Disturb Regional Stability and Security**

Increasing US influence in SCS affects regional stability in both positive and negative ways. The flip side of coin reveals potential pitfalls, military presence of US may be interpreted by China as a provocation which heightens tensions and creates more militarized atmosphere in SCS. This can create a risky scenario in which errors in judgment or misinterpretations during military exercises or FONOPs could turn into unintentional conflicts. Moreover, a stronger US presence may complicate diplomatic attempts to settle territorial conflicts amicably, which could jeopardize the region's long-term stability. The US supports Taiwan's security however this matter could lead to armed conflict due political and historical sensitivities. The complex geopolitics of Taiwan Strait has far-reaching effects on international trade, diplomatic ties, military balance and regional stability.

- **Impact on Rules-Based Order**

The US challenges China's claims based on historical rights and emphasizes respect to international law and rules-based order in SCS. This position supports the U.S. foreign policy objectives of advancing an international order based on rules. The US seek to challenge China's actions and maintain the primacy of international law in SCS by promoting the values of Freedom of Navigation, respect for territorial sovereignty and peaceful resolution of conflicts (CRS , 2024). However, achieving international consensus and collaboration is necessary for these initiatives to be effective and this can be difficult. While many governments are concerned about China's actions in SCS, some may be unwilling to publicly challenge Beijing's position, especially those with strong economic links to China.

Southeast Asian countries could prefer to take a more cautious approach to resolve maritime conflicts to avoid being caught in crossfire between US and China. Strategic considerations & divergent interests may obstruct the establishment of front against China. Taiwan issue has the potential to become a flashpoint and drastically change the strategic order in SCS. Rising tensions will have repercussions that go well beyond SCS, impacting emerging technologies regional security architecture and balance of power. Battle in Taiwan might upset delicate balance of power in SCS. Realignment in the military would probably follow this change in balance of power. The US may fortify its ties with South Korea, Japan and Australia, resulting in a

more multipolar security framework (CRS , 2024). Beyond just military issues, Taiwan dispute may trigger a proliferation of advanced weapons. Use of Hypersonic missiles and Anti-Ship capabilities would become usual and possible employment of AI and autonomous weapons systems sets dangerous precedents.

- **Alliance Realignment**

Alliance realignment in SCS could be triggered by Taiwan dispute. Stakeholders like US & Japan and other countries like India may strengthen their security connections with nations like Philippines and Vietnam (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). These strategic realignments may result in a stronger alliance network led by US in the region, which may include increased military cooperation, exercises and basing of US soldiers. On the other hand, China might try to strengthen its own ties with states like North Korea. This bipolarity may exacerbate tensions in area and raise the possibility of a military conflict. Additionally, in an effort to create more multipolar security architecture in region, Southeast Asian countries may look to establish new security alliances with one another. This might result in the emergence of new military blocs and a more polarized security system in SCS (US-led vs China-led). It could put both great powers in a challenging position when it comes to encouraging cooperation and striking a balance between their interests when it comes to 21st-century issues like environmental degradation and piracy (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

- **Undermining International Law**

Currently, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is used to resolve disputes in SCS. A dispute over Taiwan has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of UNCLOS, promote unilateralism and may leads to "might makes right" approach throughout the region (CRS , 2024). China would create a risky precedent if it disregarded UNCLOS in its pursuit of territorial claims during or after the Taiwan dispute. Other nations in area might be persuaded to handle problems in a more unilateral manner. This breakdown of rule of law in SCS may result in heightened hostilities, rise in militarization and higher chance of error and unintentional escalation. It will be essential to strengthen regional mechanisms for amicable Taiwanese conflict resolution in order to avert such situation.

- **Technological Proliferation**

Trends in SCS show that the number of sophisticated weapons, including Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs) and hypersonic missiles has significantly increased. Taiwan dispute may intensify this pattern (Bhuveshq, 2023). The use of such advanced weaponry increases the risk of any future hostilities in area. When combined with autonomous AUV capabilities, the destructive capability of hypersonic missiles might significantly slow down reaction times and raise the possibility of inadvertent escalation or miscalculation. Furthermore, spread of this

cutting-edge weaponry could provoke hostilities with neighboring regional nations. Concerned neighboring nations may feel obliged to strengthen their own defenses or even take action to stop future dissemination. This dynamic has the potential to worsen security conditions in SCS and increase regional tensions.

- **Military Dimensions**

There could be a major rise in military activity near Taiwan and in disputed areas of SCS. Increased air and maritime patrols cause friction points and increase the possibility of errors in judgment. Owing to Taiwan dispute, there would be tensions created by military's invasion of disputed territory, increasing the possibility of unintentional conflicts and heightened military preparedness in area. Beyond conventional warfare, Taiwan dispute may witness a rise in "gray zone" tactics that fall short of becoming an armed conflict (Lyle J. Morris, 2019). China and US explore the possibility of using gray zone strategies to accomplish goals without engaging in a full-scale military confrontation.

Conclusion

Taiwan's unresolved political status, strategic location, and economic standing all contribute to tensions in SCS. The territorial disputes in SCS add another layer of complexity. To prevent the war, all stake holders involved must engage in diplomacy, uphold international law and actively promote communication. Additionally, improving mutual understanding among the major powers is essential to handle any conflicts and ultimately maintaining stability in SCS. The growing involvement of US in SCS is motivated by combination of security, economic and strategic factors. These rudiments have complex and wide-ranging consequences, even while its goals are to defend its interests, fight China's influence and support FON Ops. In order to curtail influence spheres and military build-up along with advancing regional stability necessitates careful diplomacy and collaboration with allies and partners. The significance of flexible policy by Regional and extra Regional players is highlighted by changing dynamics in SCS, while considering boarder consequences for international security. Chances of military escalation are raised by China's and US increased military activity in SCS. Close encounters between Air and Naval forces raise the possibility of mishaps or errors in judgment that could turn into a more serious confrontation.

Taiwan dispute would mark a turning point in strategic order of SCS. It necessitates proactive diplomacy and crisis management techniques that may alter the outcomes ranging from the weaponization of developing technologies to the realignment of alliances. In fact, the possible Taiwan conflict would be the defining event in broader competition between the US and China and no matter who wins, the consequences for both sides would be horrendous. Many pundits today are far too interested in trying to predict Xi Jinping's schedule for seizing Taiwan

and weighing the nature and extent of US response and too few are thinking creatively about how to keep a conflict from happening. The upside is that the consequences of a war between the US and China over Taiwan, are so dire that both countries leadership should realize the need to avoid any kind of military adventure. To avoid a military conflict, regional and ERF countries should respect international norms, establish constructive dialogue and investigate alternative security frameworks. The ability of all parties involved in managing this "New Normal" with strategic foresight and commitment to peaceful resolution will determine the future of SCS.

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