

East Sea Policy of the United States in the Context of the US-China Competition in the East Sea

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Abstract: Competition in the Indo-Pacific, including strategic competition in the East Sea, continues to create many uncertainties in the security environment in East Asia. This requires research to properly assess the nature of the problem to make accurate forecasts about movement trends and impacts to proactively respond to and minimize risks and ensure maximum national interests for themselves in the region. The article points out the geo-strategic role of the East Sea region in the interests of the US and China; In particular, the article indicates the US has had critical policies in protecting their interests in particular and of the international community in general in the East Sea area. The US-China strategic competition still has many unpredictable fluctuations, so relevant countries need to adjust their strategies in relations with each country to suit the new situation.

Keywords: The US policy; the US and China rival; East Sea; Vietnam

Introduction

The East Sea is a part of the Pacific Ocean, an area of about 3.5 million km² with a biodiversity continental shelf and abundant aquatic resources. This area is considered a high-quality oil and gas reservoir. The East Sea has a critical geo-strategic position, directly affecting the interests of coastal countries, the Asia-Pacific, and even the United States.

Over the past decade, the rise of China is gradually changing the landscape and power relations in the Asia-Pacific region. The US also acknowledges China's assertive rise and finds a reasonable strategy to balance power with this country in the region. China's attempts in the East Sea have raised concerns for the United States. In particular, under the presidency of Joe Biden, the US named China as a strategic competitor in the National Security Strategy published in October 2022. The US-China strategic competition related to the East Sea comes from conflicts of interest.

1. The Geo-strategic Importance of the East Sea for the United States

Maritime benefits

The East Sea is the bridge between the Strait of Malacca and Southwest Asia and the Balintang Canal, between Bashi and the Taiwan Strait and Northeast Asia, and a strategic maritime route between the North Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The US considers the East Sea the most important trade route. This is an international water area for freedom of navigation, so the US believes that any threat to freedom of navigation through the East Sea could have significant impacts. To the regional economy, the economic growth and security of the United States depend on maintaining freedom of navigation with both merchant and military vessels (Ralph et al., 1998). Because of those significant interests, the US is increasingly showing more interest in the developments of disputes in the East Sea, the disputes settlement peacefully in the two archipelagos of Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, and other regions of the East Sea. If there is a conflict, the US is ready to respond to maintain freedom of navigation in the East Sea area (Tien Phong, 2022).

Benefits of oil and gas energy sources

Identified as one of the sea areas with the world's largest oil and gas reserves, the amount of oil in the East Sea becomes a large asset block that any country wants. In addition, according to experts, the East Sea also has frozen gas resources, which are considered valuable as substitutes for oil and gas in the future and are currently concentrated in the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa. With the United States struggling to deal with the severe consequences of the financial and economic crisis and the 2008 oil price crisis, oil and gas are more important to the United States than ever, and this significant energy source from the East Sea will be the goal that the US is always aiming for.

Military benefits

The East Sea was once an area for Japan to use as a base to attack Southeast Asian countries during World War II (Ba et al. in Truong Sa); Subic and Clark air bases of the Philippines and Cam Ranh military port were used by the United States and the (former) Soviet Union to deploy forces and expand their influence in the region during the Cold War; There are straits with natural deep water levels in the world, favorable for the deployment of strategic nuclear submarines that can approach surprise attack targets. Therefore, all countries want a specific position in the East Sea to ensure national security and deal with other non-traditional security challenges. Dealing with traditional and non-traditional security challenges has always been one of the US's national priorities. The East Sea is identified as an important traffic route in the US defense system against piracy and terrorism, especially in the Strait of Malacca.

2. The Geo-strategic Role of the South China Sea for China

The geo-strategic significance of the South China Sea for China can be seen as no different from the Greater Caribbean (including the Gulf of Mexico) for the United States in the late nineteenth century. Only when controlling the entire Caribbean Sea can the United States dominate the Western Hemisphere and dominate the power order in the Eastern Hemisphere. Similarly, China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere (JJ Mearsheimer, 2010).

If China can dominate the East Sea, then China will have the opportunity to become the hegemon of the Western Pacific Ocean and reach out to the Indian Ocean (Lee Jae-Hyung, 2002). Regarding China's geo-strategic interests in the East Sea, four critical aspects can be seen: territory resources, transportation, security-defense, and cultural-historical aspects. About *territory - resources*: Survey studies and practical exploitation of resources in the East Sea show the great potential of the East Sea. China not only wants to occupy all the islands and reefs on the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos but also the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of countries under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. (UNCLOS 1982) , these areas are more than 1,200 km from the nearest coast of China (Hainan Island).

Regarding *traffic*: While China's overland trade with other countries and continents faces many obstacles due to topography and security, especially the Southwest transport routes to access the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, Pakistan, and India, the international maritime routes on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean mainly pass through the East Sea with places such as the Strait of Malacca in the South East Sea and the area between the two Spratly Islands and the South China Sea. The critical lines are the Paracels in the North-South direction to connect China with the world. Regarding *national defense - security*: China's plot to monopolize the East Sea, especially the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagoes, is aimed at two core purposes. The first is to prevent freedom of navigation by foreign warships, especially by adversaries, beyond the limit of 12 nautical miles from the baseline. As a result, China can push the security threat from the sea away from China's shores. The second is to open the way to the blue ocean (continental sea) for the Chinese navy in the East China Sea under the control of the US and its allies. Japan and Taiwan have blocked reaching the Pacific Ocean and India. The Ocean of China. Only through the East Sea to such a blue ocean will China be able to use surface or submarine warships to bring its threat close to the United States, India, and other potential adversaries. Regarding *culture - history*: China looks to the East China Sea and the East Sea to "regain the face" of a great nation in the past (Minh TN, 2022).

3. The East Sea position in the United States' strategic policy

The 2010 National Security Strategy of the United States affirms the fundamental security interests of the United States, including 1) defending the territory of the United States, the American people, American allies, and interests of the United States; 2) stabilizing the region and eliminate any dominant power or group of powers that would threaten or hinder US opportunities or interests; 3) develop the region and promote free trade and open markets; 4) ensure a stable, secure and nuclear-free world; 5) Promoting global values, such as good governance, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom; 6) ensuring freedom of navigation, a prerequisite for regional stability and the protection of US interests (White House, 2010). These benefits have always been maintained through the Presidencies of the US.

The US foreign policy in the East Sea focuses mainly on protecting the interests of the US and its allies; the US wants favorable development in the East Sea rather than an armed conflict; The US wants to maintain a balanced relationship with coastal countries in the region. However, the current US policy in the East Sea has changed more or less in the two periods before and after the 2008 financial crisis.

So far, the East Sea has always been one of the top concerns in US foreign policy because of its core benefits. The position of President Joe Biden's administration in the East Sea is creating the defining diplomatic war in Asia over the next decade, a tug-of-war between the United States and China over a dominant role in the region.

The current East Sea policy of the US is reflected in the following four aspects:

First: The US does not agree with the threat or use of force to assert the national claim of any state in the territory of the East Sea and will consider such use as an essential issue; *Second:* The United States commits to continue supporting their allies and is ready to help protect their allies' maritime national sovereignty; *Third,* the US supports the bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism, and urges the peaceful resolution of the problems of the relevant states in a way that enhances peace, prosperity, and security in the region; *Fourth:* The United States has a strategic interest in maintaining the lines of communication in the region and considers it fundamental to disagree with any maritime claim beyond that permitted by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (White House, 2022).

The US National Security Strategy of October 2022 affirms that the Indo-Pacific will be the focal point of 21st-century geopolitics. As an Indo-Pacific power, the US has a significant stake in realizing an open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, and resilient region.

The United States is committed to supporting and protecting the freedom of the seas and building joint regional support for broad access to the East Sea - the path for nearly two-thirds of global maritime trade and 1/4 of global trade. To reinforce the commitments, the US affirmed maintaining and developing the five regional treaty alliances and the closest partnerships.

For ASEAN, the US continues to affirm cooperation; seeks more profound relationships with Southeast Asian partners through expanding diplomatic, development, and economic engagement in the region, focusing on Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.

The US also affirms the collective consensus of the Quad (Quad group) and AUKUS (US - UK - Australia) groups, according to which these two groups will also play an essential role in solving regional challenges. Actively strengthen its collective strength by bringing together America's allies and partners - including by encouraging closer linkages between Indo-Pacific nations and Europe.

Also, in the National Security Strategy 2022, the US continued to affirm its commitments to the Indo-Pacific treaty allies Australia, Japan, South Korea, the

Philippines, and Thailand. The United States will continue to protect Japan under the two countries' mutual security treaty, including the Senkaku Islands.

The United States also continues to pledge to support the freedom of navigation and overflight and to protect fishing activities by international laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

4. Specific strategies of the US in the East Sea

Upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

In light of China's recent actions regarding the East Sea issue, the Biden administration upheld the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982), which considered China's claim to be "illegal," supporting Southeast Asian countries. The US allocated more than 5 billion USD to the "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" framework to increase the ability to respond to challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and improve its strategic relationship with China (Thanh TT, 2021). China has demonstrated its ability to occupy and defend these waters against possible counterattacks. However, the US has always denied the legitimacy of its sovereignty claims to China. It assures the world, especially its allies, that China cannot fulfill those unreasonable claims, even using military means (Pham Binh, 2021).

Strengthening relationships with alliances and partnerships

In order to create a balance with China, which is emerging strongly in Asia, the US continues to strengthen further its alliance and partnership with Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines... deploy military forces to ensure regional security and strengthen the US position in the East Sea. Exercise "Super Garuda Shield" took place from August 1-14, 2022, with a large scale and scope superior to previous exercises, in the context of tensions between the US and China. The US decision to upgrade security ties with Indonesia previously was a sign of a strategic shift in Washington's policy towards the region. Under President Joe Biden, to continue to take advantage of this most essential and most significant country in Southeast Asia, in the "Garuda Super Shield" exercise plan, the Natuna Islands of Indonesia were chosen by the US as the venue for the event—the most crucial military exercise in the region between the US and its allies. The US and Indonesian militaries have held these activities since 2009. However, this exercise has an enormous scale in the region with 14 participating countries; the main content is for countries to coordinate activities to improve maritime communication, rescue, and flying exercises using temporary runways. This exercise differs from the drill of the same name in 2021, a sea island defense drill with subjects such as field training, aviation, and medical care, aiming for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Promote the formation of multilateral security cooperation mechanisms.

The QUAD, the most crucial security mechanism emerging in Asia, has recently attracted much international attention. The Security Quadrilateral Dialogue between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia discussed measures for the US to prevent China from dominating the Indo-Pacific region. The 2021 Summit is the first meeting,

the highest-level attendance of the QUAD. Also, at this Conference, for the first time, the QUAD issued a Joint Statement directly addressing the East Sea issue, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and maritime security. This is considered a significant step in gradually institutionalizing the Quad's goals. Moreover, the members of the QUAD have also demonstrated their legal position in the East Sea more clearly by strengthening cooperation to improve maritime capacity for regional countries. Cooperation in capacity building is an area that Quartet members have been and will continue to maintain, with emphasis on cooperation with countries in the ASEAN region, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

In addition to establishing the QUAD, the US-UK-Australia Trilateral Security Partnership Agreement (AUKUS) is also considered one of the prominent landmarks in the current US East Sea policy. AUKUS, including building nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs), transfers nuclear engine technology to Australia while providing infrastructure and support for mining created to ensure a favorable balance of power to enhance military deterrence, to strengthen security-military and diplomatic cooperation, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

AUKUS affirmed three issues: (1) Indo-Pacific continues to be the number one strategic and security priority of the US, surpassing the Middle East; (2) The birth of the first formal, multilateral military alliance in the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century has a multi-dimensional impact, shaping the new situation in the region according to the intentions of the Indo-Pacific region. America; (3) In essence, this is a new method of gathering US forces to deal with the rise of China, aiming to affirm the US hegemony role in the region.

Increasing presence in Southeast Asia, especially attaching importance to relations with ASEAN

Southeast Asia will play a key role in shaping the region's future, and the US's continued commitment to the region ensures US participation in this shaping process. Southeast Asia is significant to the peace and stability of all Asia-Pacific countries and the prosperity of the US economy.

President Joe Biden's administration attaches great importance to the Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, supports ASEAN's central role and ASEAN's View of the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), promotes enhanced US cooperation - ASEAN and the cooperation relationship between ASEAN member countries and the countries of the "Quad" group to solve the challenges posed. The US will closely coordinate to maintain the region's peace, security, and stability, including maritime security and safety in the East Sea. The United States continues to contribute to ASEAN's regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The United States actively supports ASEAN's efforts to negotiate a Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) with China under international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In the long term, the US still maintains the approach and wants ASEAN to share the US

strategic priorities in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the issue of containing China (Nguyen Nham, 2021).

However, in the opposite direction, the US still increased the deployment of military presence activities, demonstrating deterrence power and increasing the presence of essential areas in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific. We have used Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) as one of the ways to challenge excessive maritime claims. Notably, the FONOP trip on July 12, 2021, took place right on the fifth anniversary of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the East Sea issue (2016); During the FONOP voyage on September 8, 2021, the US Navy ship entered the 12-nautical-mile area of Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands after China's (amended) Maritime Traffic Safety Law took effect. The US also deployed more warships and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in the region, stepped up the redeployment of forces, and established a new military base in Southeast Asia (Dinh ND, 2022).

As for Vietnam, the US continues to maintain the Security-Defense Political Dialogue with Vietnam; strengthened the exchange of delegations and consultations on sensitive issues in the East Sea; proposed to increase the frequency of US military ships entering Vietnam, wanted Vietnam to join the Anti-Proliferation Initiative (SPI) and the Global Peacekeeping Initiative (GPOI) soon... Especially after ARF 17, the US still consistently affirms a favorable position for Vietnam and ASEAN on the East Sea issue.

Conclusion

The East Sea strategy is a part of the US general strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. The East Sea has always brought significant benefits to the US, especially in the current world turmoil. In the context of strategic competition with China in the East Sea, the US will continue to engage more deeply in the East Sea issue, to cooperate and assist countries in resolving maritime and island disputes in the region.

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