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AIM

1. The aim of this paper is to address China's policy in the South China Sea, which is a burning issue in terms of regional security, and international implications, which in turn suggest that the Republic of Korea (ROK)'s navy's strategy must be prepared against any projected threat, focusing on Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC).

INTRODUCTION

2. The geographical position of the South China Sea ranges from 23°27' N to 3°S latitude, and from 99°10'W to 122°10'E longitude. It is 2,400 kilometers (km) north to south, 1,300 km west to east, and is located between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. In the South China Sea, there are four groups of islands: Spratly, Paracels, Macclesfield Bank, and Pratas. The South China Sea region has the potential to be one of the most likely areas for conflict anywhere in the world since China alleges that 90% of the South China Sea is an area over which China has maritime sovereignty.

3. The geographical range of this paper is the South China Sea and it will focus on China's policy in this region. Then, after discussing international implications which focus on Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC), there will be suggestions for steps that the ROK navy might take to prepare against the Chinese threat.

DISCUSSION

4. The conflicts of the South China Sea refer to conflicts for possession of islands and maritime sovereignty between neighboring countries such as China, Vietnam,

Philippine and Brunei as well as other countries with strategic, and economic interests in the area. Even though China is insisting, as they have done continuously, of their interest in this region, which began after the United Nations (UN) in 1968 issued a report indicating that there were huge amounts of buried resources such as oil, natural gas and so on in the South China Sea area, China took five islands by force including a ground war in 1974 in the western part of the Paracel Islands and Fiery Cross of the Spratly Islands in 1988 areas formerly occupied by Vietnam. In 1995, China also took the Mischief Reef, previously occupied by the Philippines and that less than three years after the withdrawal of US military forces from the Philippines. Later, China took Loaita Island and Lankiam Cay in 1997.

5. The Chinese have not only been aggressive or offensive in the South China Sea. China has carried out small-scale provocations in the surrounding areas, but has limited its actions to levels on the lower end of the scale of crisis management. Through this strategy, China have repeatedly changed the status quo to its advantage without attracting too much international attention.¹ China is insisting on its rights to 90 percent of the area of the South China Sea, and has done so using strategic ambiguity without revealing the clear boundary of the Nine Dash Line and legal implications.² The reason for China's strategic ambiguity is firstly that there is such a huge gap between the Nine Dash Line upon which China is insisting and China's rights under international law. Secondly, the number of islands under China's effective occupation is less than those of other

¹ Dongwon Yoo, "The Change of China's policy of the South China Sea: implementation and attributes of New Expansion Strategy," *Sino-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2015).

² Taylor M. Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *South East Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 294-295.

stakeholders in the region, (e.g. Vietnam, Philippine, and Malaysia) which may also be in dispute. Under international law, there are only five islands in the South China Sea with 12 nautical miles of territorial waters, and they cannot be the basis for the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) or continental shelf. In the case of strategic ambiguity, China does not have the will to resolve the dispute immediately through a delaying strategy, and wants to reduce the gap between the Nine Dash Line historical rights and international law (effective occupation, and international maritime law agreements) while maintaining strategic ambiguity as much as possible.

6. The elevation of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea to an international issue began when the Philippines requested arbitration of a territorial dispute to the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCA) in 2013. In addition, the dispute was further complicated due to U.S. involvement.³ From a narrow perspective, the territorial dispute in the South China Sea can be viewed as a dispute over the confirmation of sovereignty and the development of maritime resources with China and neighboring countries in dispute. From a broader perspective, however, the conflict was caused by competition between the China and the United States (US). China, which has grown rapidly as an international power, wants to push out US' leverage from this region and take control of the area it considers of strategic importance. On the other hand, to restrain China's expansion in the maritime domain especially in the South China Sea, the US has been conducting freedom of navigation operations in the region and has showing itself

³ Robert D. Kaplan, "The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict," *Foreign Policy* 188, no. 4 (September 2011): 81.

willing to hold back China.⁴ Simultaneously, through an Asia Rebalancing Strategy, US has changed its Asia Pacific command to Indo Pacific Command and reallocated their 60 percent of Naval forces to the region.

7. China has shown an offensive strategy against territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which can be divided into two contexts: diplomatic and security. First of all, looking at China's offensive behavior on a diplomatic level, during US Secretary of State James Steinberg's visit to China in March 2010, State Councillor Dai Bingguo noted that the South China Sea was among 'China's core interests' for the first time though unofficial.⁵ Furthermore, Xi Jinping proposed 'a new type of major power relationship' between US and China when he visited the US in June 2013. Considering that this new relationship already includes the claim of respecting the core interests of nations over territory and sovereignty, it can be seen as a diplomatic move to reduce the possibility of US interference and intervention in the region. At the same time, China has also taken an offensive policy toward countries in territorial disputes in the region, officially vowing that it cannot make any concessions and compromises on 'core interests' such as sovereignty and territory in connection with the territorial dispute. On the security perspective concerning China's offensive behaviours, China, between 2013 and 2016, did extensive construction on nine islands in the South China Sea such as the Scarborough Shoal, the Subi Reef, the Mischief Reef, the Fiery Cross Reef, the Cuarteron Reef, the Gaven Reef, the East Island, the Johnson Reef, and the Woody Island. In addition, China has, on islands in the South China Sea deployed air defense missiles (HQ-9, HQ-26),

⁴ Sheldon W. Simon, "Conflict and Diplomacy in the South China Sea: The View from Washington," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 6 (2012): 1002.

⁵ Taylor M. Fravel, "China's Strategy . . .", 296.

long-range surveillance radar, 16 J-11 fighters, and built naval facilities capable of being able to deploy aircraft carriers. This can be seen as a move to further strengthen Anti Access and Anti Denial (A2AD) capabilities by militarizing the South China Sea islands. Even though on 12 July 2016, the PCA judged that China's claim to the legality of its actions in the South China Sea could not be admitted, China's illegal, but effective occupation on several islands has not changed.

8. At the same time that China was expanding its policy in the South China Sea, it made it clear that it was considering itself as a maritime country and intended to continue magnifying its leverage in Asia. China has been rapidly modernizing its naval power. 'Shore Defence Strategy', a previous strategic concept of the Chinese navy was changed to 'Offshore Defense Strategy.' The first goal of Offshore Defense Strategy is to build enough capabilities to achieve control of the sea integral to the First Islands Chain (linking Taiwan, Kyushu of Japan, Vietnam, and Malaysia). Following that, the next goal is to expand a defense line to the Second Islands Chain (linking the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Philippines, the Bonin Islands, the Mariana Islands, and the Caroline Islands). China is pushing ahead with this strategy in order to accomplish A2AD to the internal area of the 1st and 2nd Islands Chains by 2020 and 2050 respectively. Recently, China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, departed from Dalian in December 2016 and conducted military exercises across the Strait of Miyako, Japan and the Taiwan Strait to the Strait of Bashi, in the Philippines.⁶ This was interpreted as a demonstration of the operational

⁶ Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (January 2013): 450.

capability and the will of the Chinese navy to have a footprint in areas which included Japan, Taiwan and the South China Sea.

9. China declared ‘Protection of the Maritime Rights and Interests’ as the official maritime policy and is going ahead building a number of oversea bases in Myanmar, Bangladeshi, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in order to implement the ‘String of Pearl Strategy’ toward India and the Atlantic oceans. Geographically and strategically, Chinese influence of the South China Sea could be a ‘dagger under the neck’ in support of the expansion of China’s strategies such as ‘One Belt, One Road’, and ‘String of Pearl’ because safe sea routes between the various countries are essential and require the safety of SLOC. In order to protect Chinese national maritime interests, the Chinese navy changed their ‘Off-Shore Defense Strategy’ to ‘Positive Off-Shore Defense Strategy’. In recent years, China built a naval base in Hainan and at the same time, built the capabilities for power projection by deploying advanced submarines, and an aircraft carrier. These capabilities were interpreted as a means for China to achieve control of the South China Sea and enhance its long distance operations.

10. What implications could the above situations and China’s policy have on international security? The key to the strategic importance of the South China Sea is SLOC. Sea lines of Communication are used as a comprehensive concept that includes maritime transport for military and non-military purposes. The South China Sea is the sea route that links the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and the Spratly Islands are located in the middle. If conflicts in the South China Sea were to be severely amplified, it would be expected that China’s offensive strategy, by seizing the SLOC in the South China Sea area, would be to take the initiative to threaten any maritime initiative led by

the US. Taking control of the South China Sea area means that China would have a direct influence on the regional balance of power and the possible survival of several countries in the area who are reliant on open SLOC. For example, unrestricted SLOCs are essential to the economic well being and economic security of Far East countries such as the Republic of Korea and Japan, which rely heavily on the unrestricted delivery by sea of oil from Middle East countries. Moreover, about half of Australia's international trade depends on sea routes. If the SLOC of the ROK is blocked or restricted by a conflict between countries or by military, and/or non-military threats, it could have a significant impact on the ROK's survival with most of its industrial and economic activities being paralyzed, starting with the disruption of energy supplies.

11. Currently, the only country that could seriously threaten the ROK's SLOC is China except for non-military or potential threats such as maritime terrorism, which could pose threats to the safety of the SLOC in the South China Sea in connection with disputes over maritime sovereignty and rights or competition with the US. Even though the safety of SLOC is guaranteed by international law, it is obviously dependent on the maritime security provided by the US. These safeguards though could be weakened further if China emerges as an even greater regional major power in the future. Therefore, the protection of the SLOC is of vital interest to the Korean economy, and the ROK must consider and prepare its capabilities to ensure the safety of the SLOC. Recently, a situation arose where China protested to the ROK National Defense Department since the ROK navy destroyer "Munmu the Great", returning from its mission in Somalia, had violated China's territorial claims to the sea in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands. As such, territorial disputes between countries in the South China Sea are already becoming

a real issue for the ROK, and such conflicts in the South China Sea are likely to continue, and indeed escalate. Therefore, China's South China Sea policy, the rapid naval power buildup, and the A2AD Strategy risk to bring significant challenges to the ROK Governments and its navy in the near future.

CONCLUSION

12. The emerging rapid economic growth of China has been providing opportunity for the strengthening of its military power. Modernized military capabilities centered on naval power have been employed to secure national interests for both the shore and far oceans. China has been strongly insisting on their rights and their maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea as it considers the area to be included as part of their 'core interests.' Moreover, China has continuously reinforced the A2AD capability through militarizing and fortifying the islands in the region. At the same time, China has declared its identity as a maritime power and shifted its maritime strategy aggressively, thus showing a willingness to take control of the maritime hegemony in the region. Considering the aforementioned actions and the fact that the situation in the South China Sea has not changed despite the judgement of the PCA, the expectation that China would be willing to make concessions and compromises in the South China Sea would be for many states an over optimistic strategic misjudgment.

13. The conflicts in the South China Sea are not just between China, US, and neighboring countries, but also of direct concern to the ROK. If China's leverage in the region and regional conflicts become more intensified, it could be possible that the ROK SLOC would be seriously threatened, with the consequences of not just verbal

challenges, but by the escalation to hostile military action. It is not saying that armed conflict between the US and China over actions in the South China Sea could happen, but the ROC must come up with methods to prepare for a worst-case scenario. The ROC, as a country which could play a strategic role in the region geographically, should build capabilities to contribute to lasting peace in the region and should enhance its ability to act as a balance of power between countries in the region, and thus be able to cope with changes to international order and security.

RECOMMENDATION

14. The ROK navy, as the force underpinning the ROK's policy and prosperity by its use of sea power, should focus its attention on force development and maritime cooperation simultaneously to be prepared for the protection of SLOC especially in the South China Sea. On the force development aspect as a long term project, the ROK navy should establish the capabilities able to conduct power projection far away as well as achieving control of the sea against North Korean (NK) naval forces. For that, long range maritime patrol aircraft are an essential asset in order to monitor maritime activities over a wide range of the South China Sea and any areas of potential conflicts. Additionally, maritime strike aircraft and aircraft able must be procured to provide air superiority and control of the air. Therefore, the ROC navy should build the task fleet, including aircraft carriers, which could act both as a deterrence against hostile actions by NK aimed at the ROK, and for far distance operations. In conjunction with the long-term projects, the importance on focusing on short-term and operationally activities cannot be underestimated. As such, it is urgent to establish operational concepts and capabilities taking into account present forces in being and use these forces in the event of possible

conflicts, such as the need to act as a deterrence and to respond to threats from North Korea.

15. On the maritime cooperation aspect, efforts to promote international maritime cooperation between countries in the region is crucial. For example, as East Asian maritime security issues are inherently fluid and complex, it is imperative that cooperation be developed in a gradual manner to prevent conflict.

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