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The Contentious Topic of the South China Sea

What are China and the EU's interests in the South China Sea, and how do they coincide, if they do at all?

Bachelor's project in European studies with political science

Supervisor: Viktoriya Fedorchak

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

ABSTRACT

With China's rising economic and military power, the South China Sea (SCS) has become the world's most contested water. With 6 nations claiming part of or all of the Spratly and Paracel Islands, the tension is high. 1/3 of all trade also travels through the area, making the SCS one of the busiest sea lines of communications. China has in 2013 launched one of its biggest projects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This will improve China's geopolitical and economic aspects for the future vis-à-vis the United States (US). In order to preserve its economic interests, China has also become more assertive in the region. This is of concern for the European Union (EU), as their economic interests in the area are huge as well. With concern for China's growing influence and power, the EU issued a statement in 2016 which urged for a peaceful resolution of the tension. However, this also reflects the difficulties the EU has when dealing with China. The BRI project has made countries such as Greece or Bulgaria not wanting/daring to take a tough stance towards China as their economy is so dependent on them. Lastly, with the growing isolationism of the US, and China's growing influence, the contemporary international order may be under fire.

Med Kinas økende økonomiske og militære makt, Sør-Kina-havet har blitt ett av verdens mest omstridte vann. 6 forskjellige land legger krav på litt eller alt av Paracel- og Spratly-øyene, noe som gjør at spenningen er høy. 1/3 av all handelen går også gjennom området, noe som gjør Sør-Kina-havet til et av de viktigste handelsrutene til sjøs per dags dato. Kina, i 2013, lanserte kanskje sitt største prosjekt i form av Belte-vei-initiativet. Dette vil hjelpe med å bedre Kina sin geopolitiske, så vel som økonomiske posisjon i fremtiden vis-à-vis USA. For å sikre seg sine økonomiske interesser i området har Kina også blitt mere villig til å bruke makt i området. Dette er noe som er av veldig stor bekymring for den Europeiske Union (EU), ettersom EU sine interesser i området er vel så store som Kinas. Med bekymring for Kina sin økende influens og makt, ga EU ut en uttalelse i 2016 som oppfordret til fredelige løsninger for konfliktene som er der. Derimot, illustrerer dette også vanskelighetene EU har når det kommer til håndteringen av Kina. Belte-vei-initiativet til Kina har gjort slik at land som Hellas og Bulgaria ikke vil/tørr å ta en hard holdning når det kommer til Kina, på grunn av at økonomien deres er så avhengig av Kina sin. Til slutt, med den økende isolasjonistiske politikken til US, og Kina sin økende influens, er dagens internasjonale orden i fare for å endres.

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List of acronyms

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

ECS – East China Sea

EU – European Union

EEZ – Economic Exclusive Zone

FON – Freedom of Navigation

FONO – Freedom of Navigations Operation

G7 – Group of 7

IMO – International Maritime Organization

OBOR – One Belt, One Road

PCA – Permanent Court of Arbitration

PLAN – People’s Liberation Army Navy

PRC – People’s Republic of China

RQ – Research question

SCS – South China Sea

SDF – Japans Self Defence Forces

SLoC – Sea Lines of Communications

SUA Convention – Convention for Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation

TPP – Trans-Pacific Partnership

UK – United Kingdom

UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

US – United States

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

With almost all the entire land area of the earth being claimed by countries, the most interesting area to exercise its sovereignty these days is on the sea. This is reflected in the South China Sea (SCS), which is the most contentious and sought-after area in the present day, in addition to being one of the busiest Sea Lines of Communications (SLoC). On the surface, the SCS conflict may seem to be caused by the Spratly and Paracel Islands – in other words territorial disputes between the littoral states around the SCS. However, upon close examination of the topic, the issue at hand is much more complex than that: with the US having historically been the main actor in the region after the Second World War, China are now beginning to flex its muscles by exercising both soft and hard power¹ in its own backyard. This has caused tension between the Chinese and the Americans (Glaser & Benson, 2020).

The economic, geopolitical and security aspects of the region is the focus of my sub questions, taken from a Chinese then European Union (EU) perspective. Furthermore, the interaction between China and the EU will then be examined and studied whether they coincide at all. My research question will be, "What are China's and the EU's interests in the South China Sea, and how do they coincide, if they do at all"?

1.2 Literature review

When looking at literature about the geopolitical, economic and security position of the SCS, the main argument that authors make has China at the center. The focus of academic texts from the region is also of course about the geopolitical aspect, as per the sovereignty issues over the islands in the region and control of one of the busiest trade routes in the world.

For example, Jinhao Zhou's main argument in his article "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice" is that the semi-enclosed water is of "vital interest" to the Chinese. He argues on to say that the South China Sea is, in fact, a "core interest" to the Chinese (Zhou, 2019, p. 33-34). Ian Storey, a Senior Fellow² at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, writes that China's unilateral approach to the SCS could create tension to the other major powers of the world (Storey, 2015, p. 39). Andy Yee argues that it is not weird that the SCS have become a hot topic, and cites Barry Buzan's argument: "[...] *the dramatic rise in the realisable economic value of oceans and the rapid spread of sovereign states to cover virtually all land areas as reasons to explain why oceans have become areas of intense competition for scarce goods*".

In 1941 Nicolas Spykman, a geostrategic, released a book called *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, in which he presented his theory which has gotten the name "Spykman's theory". The foundation of this theory is that whoever controls the (Eurasian) rimland controls the world. In Spykman's words: "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world" (Gray, 2015, p. 886). Spykman further argued that should a dominant power establish itself on either Europe or East Asia, the international order would be challenged.

¹ Soft and Hard power are two conceptions in international relations and means that power derives from two things: cultural and economic influence and military and economic power respectively.

² The title 'Senior Fellow' is a research position equivalent that of an Associate or Full professor – depending on experience. The title is given to someone who independently can work directing research. (University of Washington, Office of academic personnel. (s.a.)

Although this is concerning mainly to the Americans and present a challenge towards their power (China v. US), this would indeed also have consequences for Europe, and the international order (Wu, 2018, p. 798).

However, the economic and security aspect is not forgotten. With China's new initiative, "One Belt, One Road", an increase in texts studying the economic prospect for both China and the EU have come into being. The economic aspects directly affect the security positions of the countries involved. A briefing of the European Parliament in 2016 analysed the region and important questions. One of the findings was that 'over half of the world's oil tanker traffic travels through this critical commercial gateway' (Grieger, 2016). This makes the SCS important to both China and the EU, as well as for other countries.

Salvador S. F. Regilme Jr. also highlights the economic aspects of the region by highlighting the amount of trade that goes through it. However, his main argument is centred mainly around China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, though in addition to that he underscores the importance of the US in the region and how that could be a potential conflict (Regilme, 2018, p. 214).

The similarities in my research question (RQ) to their topic is not very related. Most of the literature on the topic focuses either on China or the EU, but rarely both. However, there are some texts that come close to my RQ, with Finamore's article from 2017 being one of them. Finamore's text, however, is based on a timeline between the end of the cold war (in some instances further back) up till today (Finamore, 2017, p. 164). I will include a bit of the history of the SCS, however I am not going to be basing my analyses on that, as my analyses will comprise of recent years.

There is some literature on the topic of EU in the SCS. One example would be Liu Nengye & Xu Qi's text "How might the European Union Engage Constructively with China in the South China Sea?" (Nengye & Xi, 2018, p. 301). While this looks at how the EU and China get along in the SCS, it does so only in two aspects – economy and to some degree security. This does not include the geopolitical aspect that I have chosen to look at as well. Furthermore, Zhao Minghao has written an article about the BRI program of China, and its implications for China-EU relations (Minghao, 2016, p. 112). When it comes to the question of economy, there are plenty of articles regarding the EU. The issue that comes up here is that the main actors in those articles is not the EU, but China. The EU is a second variable in those articles, and if one wants an article with the EU as the main actors, the European Union's website is the best place to go of which it does not provide individuals actor's assessment of the situation.

Furthermore, the differences in what I do and what they do is usually that they have a more specific question, not presenting three different aspects that need to be answered. I will be including more topics / aspects in the Sino-EU (security, economy and geopolitical) relationship concerning the SCS. This will not only allow us to get a more thorough view on the topic, but also to make up one's own mind. The analyses that I will be doing will include more topics, and therefore consequently be more in-depth than other research on the topic. The timeframe is also going to be playing a part when reading sources, as most sources look as far back as to the mid-20th century.

There is a gap in the literature, however, and that is how China and the EU cooperates in the region, and if their goals coincide. This will be answered by looking for the different

arguments on both sides, trying to analyze them. I will also look at newspapers to see whether they do coincide, or if the media perceive them to cooperate or not.

1.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that will be used in this article, is the branch international relations theory. More specific, Realism. H. Morgenthau (along with E. Carr) is considered the main founders of realism, and he writes that the main principles of realism are:

"1. Politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. 2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. 3. Power and interest are variable in content. 4. Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states. 5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. 6. The autonomy of the political sphere." (Donnelly, 2000, p. 7)

Robert Gilpin has argued that the most important factor to have in mind when analysing world politics, the 'dynamics of power relations over time'. This implies that with the growing rise of power from one state, others will be wary, and the result will be conflict (Kirshner, 2012, p. 54). Realism, in Jonathan Kirshner words is: "Realists see states, pursuing interests, in an anarchic setting where the real possibility of war, and with it the prospect of subjugation or annihilation, must be accounted for" (Kirshner, 2012, p. 55). However, classical realism tries to accommodate for the rising power, and there are three main points that need to be accounted for; 1) reality of power; 2) challenging the status quo; 3) that politics matter, and that the future is largely unwritten (Kirshner, 2012, p. 55).

As I will focus on the EU and China and their politics and interests (both direct and indirect) concerning the SCS, realism seems the correct choice. Furthermore, the SCS, as it is a disputed area between a lot of states, needs to be settled by the international community, and when China shows signs of ignoring the IC (international community), the topic of international anarchy comes up. Lastly, China also sees the SCS as one of its core interests, making it even more relevant to talk about it with Realism as a theory.

1.4 Method

The main method that I will be using is a 'case study'. This is because I will be exploring the SCS through a holistic viewpoint with China and the EU as the main two actors. In addition to using a case study, I will also use "document analysis" and do a "comparative research" of China and the EU. For the document analysis, the documents that I will be using is some of the official documents of the EU and China, as well as newspapers (primary sources) and documents of authors who are experts in the region, as well as interpretation of primary sources (secondary sources). Along with those, I am also going to be using stories and narratives from newspapers to actualize the region and the topic (primary and secondary sources). This allows us to gain a lot of insight into the region and the SCS, and to understand it. Document analysis also gives us the opportunity to dive into primary sources and see what happens there. Lastly, a comparative analysis of Chinas' and the EU's standpoint will be able to put things into perspective.

However, one needs to be aware of the danger of false generalisation, as well as the researchers own limitations when it comes to the case. However, the limitations are also removable, if the researcher is aware of them, and therefor case study is a good route to take (Bloomberg, 2018, p. 239). Furthermore, doing a document analyses also means

that some of the sources used will have an entirely different purpose than what I will use them for, and thus they may not answer the question I am looking for. However, with a wide variety of sources, this is easily overcome. Secondly, they may be biased, as the author who wrote them may want to highlight an issue or an event etc. To solve the problem with a biased author, I will have inclusionary and exclusionary criteria that will determine whether a text is eligible to be used in my study or not. The inclusionary criteria will be whether the author has any expertise in the region or this subject alone; is the author located in China or abroad, meaning if he belongs to a foreign institution or a Chinese one; and does the author use credible arguments and evidence to prove his point.

Lastly, comparative research will be of great help when comparing the two policies of China and the EU up against each other. The way I will do this is by looking at China's policy regarding economy, geopolitical and security versus EU's policy on the same subjects. This will allow us to spot the differences that they have and the similarities, as well as identify how they interact with one another, and if they coincide.

1.5 Analysis

The structure of the text will start by introducing the topic at hand and explaining why it is a relevant topic. Next, I will explain the EU's and Chinese's interests in the region considering the economic, geopolitical, and security policies, and analyse if they align with each other. To do this, I will ask the questions about what they have in common, what they do not have in common and lastly what the opportunities for future cooperation are.

2.0 The EU's position in the SCS

As discussed in the previous chapters, the South China Sea's predicament attracts attention from not only the ASEAN states and China, but also the EU and the US. In this chapter, the focus will be on EU's interest with regards to economy, security, and geopolitics.

The Spratly and Paracel Islands have caused a predicament with regards to the political ties between the states in the region. On more than one occasion, China has violated the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam. This year April 2020 has seen China violating it twice. One of the times, a Chinese boat rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel, endangering the lives of the fishermen on board (Vu & Pearson, 2020). With such serious violation, how then, does the EU influence events in a water far away from Europe and contested by 6 countries?

First, we are going to look at the economic aspect of the South China Sea for the EU. For Europe, having enjoyed being the rulers of Asia and colonising the region for a century, its interests are now predominantly economic in nature (Buszynski & Hai, 2019, p. 72). Looking at statistics from Eurostat, almost 20% of all goods imported into the EU is from China, while around 10% of all goods exported from the EU is to China. China is then the largest importer of goods into the EU and the third largest exporter of goods from the EU (Eurostat, 2020). However, excluding China, the East Asia region has been home to some of the world's fastest growing economies – the so-called Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan) (Paldam, 2003, p. 453). ASEAN is the third largest trading partner for the EU, only behind the US and China. The EU is for the ASEAN countries the second largest trading partner, only behind China (European Commission, 2020). In all, the region is of great importance economically for the EU.

In recent times, it has been discovered that the SCS is also rich of natural gas and oil fields. For a better understanding of the wealth of the SCS, we could compare it to the Persian Gulf. As the Persian Gulf is one of the richest oils and gas reserves in the world, the SCS would be up there among it. This makes the SCS not only a matter of economics, but also of security and geopolitical concerns (Ramkumar et al., 2020, p. 1). To put it into a perspective, Japan needs to import around 90% of its energy requirements according to World Nuclear Association, and whoever controls the straits in and out of the SCS also controls what goes through (World Nuclear Association, 2020).

According to WorldTradia, approximately 25% of all seaborne trade goes through the strait of Malacca (WorldTradia, 2017). The Strait of Malacca is the strait that separates Indonesia and Malaysia and connects the Indian Ocean with the SCS. With China and the ASEAN countries making up a large share of the economy for the EU, both in imports and exports, it is vital that the strait is kept open and free. Not only does trade from Europe go through the strait to get to the North-East Asian countries such as South Korea or Japan, but trade from the Western Pacific Rim goes through destined to the West (Simon, 2011, p. 1).

In addition to the competing claims of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, the SCS is also an attractive place for pirates. The EU, having previously and presently been working on combating piracy outside of the coast of Somalia through the ATALANTA Operation, could provide valuable knowledge to the Chinese and the ASEAN countries in how to deal with the pirates in the SCS (EUNAVFOR, s.a.). However, a prerequisite for this is that the coastal states in the region needs to cooperate with the EU. Of the states that are in the vicinity, Singapore is the only state that has piracy on its agenda, while Malaysia and Indonesia being much more concerned about their fishing rights. (Simon, 2011, p. 28) This is further proven by the SUA Convention from 1988 – Convention for Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of maritime Navigation (SUA). The International Maritime Organization (IMO) says *"The main purpose of the Convention is to ensure that appropriate action is taken against persons committing unlawful acts against ships. These include the seizure of ships by force; acts of violence against persons on board ships; and the placing of devices on board a ship which are likely to destroy or damage it"*. (IMO, s.a.). In other words, it is a convention against piracy. One issue is that the only state of the littoral states around the Malacca strait that is a signatory state, is Singapore (Simon, 2011, p. 28). The problem with this is that if a major upheaval in the Malacca Strait happens, it could disrupt the trust the user states have in the ability of the littoral states around the strait to secure their boat's safety. Furthermore, it would be hard for the EU to take matters into its own hands, as it is the littoral states (Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia) responsibility as they have sovereignty over the strait, to enforce the safety. (Simon, 2011, p. 28).

When looking at what the actual position the EU have taken against China regarding the SCS, the EU statement from 2016 is representative of that. Here, the EU proclaimed that they are committed to "maintaining a legal order, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and that they urged the claimants states to resolve their disputes peacefully. In addition, the EU's stand on the militarization of the island-groups in the water was that of concern for escalation and the limitation of freedom of navigation and overflight (European Council, 2016).

However, while this statement takes a tough stance against the militarization of the region, it came relatively late. In 2003, the EU noted the importance to build good ties

with China, Japan, and India, while not mentioning the SCS nor the East China Sea (ECS). After the UNCLOS tribunal's decision on the Philippines v. China case, the EU issued again a statement calling on all parties to use peaceful means to resolve the dispute. Although, the EU acknowledged the tribunals decision, it was criticized because it failed to hold Beijing accountable. (Cottey, 2019, p. 478)

As we have mentioned, the EU and China are two of the biggest trading partners for each other, and two of the biggest economies in the world. In addition, the region is also host to the ASEAN, making the region even more beneficial for the EU to have access to. China is, however, not only important to the EU, but also to many of the individual states. This issue comes forth when the EU for example wants to present a mutual front on issues concerning China. With China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underway, and Greece's strategic position, China have been agreeing on multiple deals with Athens (SilkRoadBriefing, 2019). Greece's Foreign Minister (FM) Nikos Dendias met with and expressed, to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, that "The Greek side will never forget China's valuable help to Greece during the financial crisis and will continue to offer understanding and support on issues related to the Chinese side's major concern" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

In addition to the BRI, China also launched "17+1", which will be focused on Central and Eastern Europe (17) and China (1) strengthening investments relations and promoting business between them (Vangeli & Pavličević, 2019, p. 361). Bulgaria, another country located on the eastern frontier of the EU, is a target for China. This has made Bulgaria also one of the beneficiary states of the BRI and could hamper its relations in accordance to the EU (China-CEE, 2019).

While countries like Italy and Greece are experiencing a deeper impact from the Chinese, France and Britain have taken a tougher stance against China (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 206). The US, being the lone superpower for a long time, and now experiencing geopolitical challenges with Chinas assertiveness in the ECS and SCS, has started conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONO). Britain and France have jumped onboard the ship and is assisting the US with military vessels (Zhen, 2018). These operations will help established a rule-based order in the region, as well as assist smaller littoral states. These FONO's are being conducted as an answer to China's – among others – excessive claim to the SCS. The operations' goal is in addition to being an answer to Chinas "nine-dash line", is also operation that aims to ensure the Freedom of Navigation (FON) – thereby the name.

The economic aspects of the SCS's importance for the EU is what has been argued up to here. Another topic is the geopolitical aspect. The Asia-Pacific region has in the latter years been under the US sphere of influence, in accordance with the San Francisco conference from 1951. The last three decades has seen China rise in both economic and military power, making them able to contend with the US. In addition, the states in the Asia-Pacific region has become dependent on both the US and China. This is because China, with its booming economic growth, has become a powerhouse. Its rise has made political analyst, notably Robert Kelly, compare the situation to that of the Cold War era (Mishra, 2016, p. 160). Furthermore, China's rise to power has also caused the four major non-NATO countries in the Asia-Pacific region – Australia, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines – to become drawn towards Beijing for different reasons. The "alliance mutuality" these four countries had with the US is slowly declining (Mishra ,2016 p. 168-169).

With the geopolitical situation in the Asia-Pacific region is shifting towards China, and the US' position is weakening, the EU is more reliant on itself to influence things in their favour. With the increasing assertiveness of China regarding the East- and South China seas, the normative policy of the EU, or "civilian power", is being scrutinized and called into question for its lack of results. This could prove even more troublesome now with the recent development concerning President Donald Trump's policy towards Asia. In his inauguration speech, Trump delivered the powerful words; "From this moment on, it's going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families." (The White House, 2017). Short time after having been elected, Trump withdraws the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Beeson, 2020, p. 15), which is one of the more advanced regional trade- and investment agreements in the world, (although much less than the EU) including 12 Pacific states (Regjeringen, 2015). Mark Beeson, a political scientist, and professor from Australia, has criticized Trump for his lack of understanding for the region as a strategic important position (Beeson, 2020, p. 15). Trump's willingness to withdraw from established organizations could cause a serious challenge for the EU regarding the Asia-Pacific region. For example, Trump withdrew the US from the Iranian nuclear deal in 2018 (Landler, 2018), in October 2019 he withdrew the US troops from Syria declaring on Twitter "WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT" (Trump, 2019), and Donald Tusk's criticism of the US as a threat to the established international order in 2018 (European Council, 2018). These examples are but a few of an ever-increasing number of times Trump has been criticized. The reason for Trump and his policy's inclusion into this text, is the implications it may have for Europe and the EU. With Trump taking the US on the road to isolationism and protectionism, other countries interest and companies will be in a position of jeopardy. Increasing isolationism will also hurt the US in the aspect of geopolitics – as can be seen in China's increasing assertiveness and willingness to use force in the SCS. Furthermore, the perception by "ASEAN members consider the EU as unable to mitigate big powers' competition or as tending to side with the United States on sensitive security issues» (Floristella, 2019, p. 183). Floristella further writes in her article, that the EU's geopolitical influence in the region is limited compared to the major powers in the region. Lastly, she argues that the EU's internal (Brexit, Euroscepticism, and the difference in policy among member states) and external (the migration crisis) problems could result in the blocs dwindling capacity to remain a relevant player in the region (Floristella, 2019, p, 191).

3.0 The Chinese position in the SCS

"For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself." (Rosenberg & Chung, 2008, p. 51).

This quote from Sir Walter Raleigh is a good way to illustrate something that was already established in the previous chapter – that the SCS is one of the most important SLoC routes in the world, and that the importance is huge for the Chinese, and to the whole world in general. When looking at the Chinese position compared to the EU's position, we expect to see differences. Historically speaking, China has enjoyed a hegemonic position in its region³. From early history, China and the East Asian region had established a

³ "The core of the tribute-system was a set of institutions and norms that regulated diplomatic and political contact, cultural economic relations, and in particular explicitly stated a relationship between two political unites." This is what David C. Kang writes about it. He further writes that the tribute system is an international

hierarchic system where China were on top, while the other states were lesser. This included that states like Vietnam and Korea had to pay tribute, to be allowed protection and to trade with China. This enabled the region to maintain a long-lasting peace with exceptionally few wars – at least compared to Europe. (Kang, 2010, p. 54)

Looking at today's China and the regional order, the notable thing to notice is that the region follows the western international order – the Westphalian order. This implies that sovereignty and equality among states are very important (Kang, 2010, p. 2). This is important when considering how the Chinese interacts with other littoral states around the SCS as well as the ECS. Having been first among many for centuries, the shift to become equal can be a tough transformation. With Japans military resurgence, the struggle for dominance in the region is made harder for China. After World War Two, with the Peace Constitution from 1946, the "Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation" (Easley, 2017, p. 68). To achieve this, "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized" (Easley, 2017, p. 68). However, with the years, the role of the military has developed. In 1991, in the "Gulf War", Japan contributed with financial aid. With the 9/11-terrorist attacks, Japan further sought to expand the role of its Self-Defence Forces (SDF) (Easley, 2017, p. 73). The rise of China, and its willingness to use coercive methods vis-à-vis Taiwan (Easley, 2017, p. 71), affects how the Japanese view its military, while for China the "resurgence of military Japan" is a fear.

Another point to notice, is the consequences of the implementation of the Westphalian system to Asia. After having gained its independence from Europe, the region adopted many of the Westphalian principles, and often the maxims of the system. For example, sovereignty in Asia is seen as having an absolute character, meaning criticism from other states is seen as another aspect from colonialism (Kissinger, 2014, p. 178). This again means that if for example China treats its citizens badly and neglects human rights, China disregards criticism from the international society. Furthermore, this can be applied towards the SCS. China, having claimed around 90% of the entire SCS with its "Cow-tongue claim", seeks to push for unilateral changes in the SCS, and discourage the international community to get involved (Garcia & Breslin, 2016, p. 270). The «cow-tongue» claim appeared on a Chinese map in 1947, and since 1949, when the People's Republic of China assumed control of mainland China, they also inherited all the maritime claims in the region (Zhen, 2016). In addition to China laying claim to almost the entire water, both the disputed islands in the territory is Chinese. These islands are called Paracel and Spratly Islands, and is claimed by China and Vietnam, and China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia respectively (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 187).

As mentioned earlier, the SCS could be a source for future conflict. When talking about the First Island Chain, we mean the a "line" going from the Japanese Islands, to the Ryukyu's, through the Philippines and to the tip of Southeast Asia (Stavridis, 2019). Looking at the development from recent years, the trend is that China is exerting its influence on this First Island Chain, by building military bases on the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Watkins, 2015), as well as forcefully taking control of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012 from the Philippines (Santos, 2019). This subsequently made Manila formally file a case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) against the Peoples Republic of Chinas

order based on a status hierarchy, with China in the middle and everyone else beneath them. (Kang, 2010, p. 55)

(PRC) claims, where the outcome was that the ruling went in favour of the Philippines (Pogies, 2017, p. 97). The implications for this was that China's "nine-dash line" and its historic claim to the SCS was ruled void in the international community. Xi Jinping rejected the tribunals verdict, and with Duterte assuming office in Manila, the Philippines started to move closer to Beijing to gain position. (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 188).

The reason why the First Island Chain is important for China is because of the potential to "hem China inside" and limit them to the South China Sea (Yoshihara, 2012, p, 293). A good way to look at the Island Chains, would be to perceive them as physical barriers that contains Chinese influence and preventing them from reaching the Pacific. As the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) power grows, so too will its influence over the Island chains – from the first to the second Island chain and so forth (Yoshihara, 2012, p. 296). The island chains have thus become the focal points in a rising geopolitical conflict between the US and China.

With eh PRC not accepting the tribunals verdict in the China v. Philippines case in the PCA, the respect China has for international law is unsettling. The New York Times wrote in 2016 that China "threatens to use force to protect the maritime interests the court has now declared illegal" (The New York Times, 2016). In addition, China have been building artificial islands around the reefs under its control in the Paracel and Spratly Islands (Romaniuk & Burgers, 2019). In October 2019, China used its newly acquired islands as logistics hubs for its activities in the SCS, as a Chinese oil survey vessel left the Vietnamese EEZ after a three-month long standoff. (Le, 2019). This is cause for concern for the rest of the region, as it proves Chinas capabilities can be extended for longer periods.

Chinas economic interest concerning the area are huge. With the launch of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative in 2013 – also called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China aims at positioning itself as the "state in the middle". This is made possible because of the positioning of the Belt and Road Initiatives route, which is placed near most of the world's population (Minghao, 2016, p. 110). Furthermore, the BRI project of China, which in addition to cover nearly the entire Eurasia, also covers parts of Africa and the Mediterranean, to mention some. Disregarding the economic improvements that will accompany the project, it could also promote long-term stability and common prosperity in the aforementioned areas (Minghao, 2016, p, 112). Another positive side-effect for China, is that if these things do happen, the perception of China in the international community would improve drastically, and its soft power would increase.

In addition to being a economic project of huge magnitude, the BRI also has an ideological motive. In 2013 as Xi Jinping launched the project, he also announced the "Chinese Dream", which is to help people get out of poverty, not only in China but in the rest of the world. The BRI project also forces other nations to orient themselves around Xi's ideas, making them "loyal" implementers. Lastly, the project also emphasizes Chinas power when it comes to economy, legitimacy, and global standing (Jones & Zeng, 2018, p. 1421-1422).

The BRI is not the only economic interest China has in the region. There are reported to be tons of crude oil and gas under the seafloor of the SCS. Because of the "cow-tongue" claim by that of China, they claim by default almost all of it (Ramkumar et al., 2020, p. 2, 4). A Chinese report estimates that the oil in the SCS would amount to 213 billion barrels. (Ramkumar et al., 2020, p. 3). This could be considered a energy security issue

for both China and the other littoral states, and it remains to be seen how it is solved in the future.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the geopolitical conflict between the EU and China are simply non-existing. With China and the EU being the world's two biggest markets, a potential conflict between them would be either concerning security, or economy. (Minghao, 2016, p. 111). And as we have seen, with the launch of the BRI project from China, its relations to certain countries in Europe has increased significantly. Notably Greece and Bulgaria, however Italy has also been swayed towards the Chinese position. Having joined the BRI project as the only Group of 7 (G7) country, and one of the biggest EU economies, the fragility, as Marc Lanteigne puts it, of the EU is revealed (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 206).

Furthermore, China and the states of the ASEAN community's relationships is an important part for the stabilization of the SCS. With China using the "cabbage strategy" to forcefully take islands from the other claimants in the Spratly Island. Kissinger mentions that military budgets are rising in Southeast Asia, and national rivalries is evermore present. Nations are more and more willing to use force in the pursuit of "core national interests" (Kissinger, 2014, p. 178).

As with the EU, piracy in the SCS could prove to be a problem for the Chinese as the Chinese are in a much larger degree dependent on the SCS as a trade route. Martin Purbrick, a former Royal Hong Kong police officer, has said that for piracy to disappear, a major naval force needs to project power in the region (Purbrick, 2018, p. 11). Furthermore, this needs the acceptance of the littoral states. The problem with this is twofold; (1) Chinese intervention in the region will not be accepted by the littoral states, nor by the US (Rosenberg & Chung, 2008, p. 59); (2) and China is not happy about American present in the SCS in general, in addition that the littoral states do not want to solely rely on external help from the United States (Rosenberg & Chung, 2008, p. 63).

We have now talked about the economic and geopolitical aspects of the SCS for China. Now we will focus on its security aspect. For China, the SCS could considered its backyard, and this alone would qualify it to become a security topic. However, there are more to the topic, as we have already seen. As the SCS is one of the most important SLoC's in the world, and China have gone from being a petroleum exporter in 1992, to becoming the world's largest net oil importer in 2013 (Tunsjø, 2014, p. 97). Control over the SCS, or preventing other states, from gaining control, is crucial for China. As beforementioned, the Paracel and Spratly Islands works as bases for the PLAN and makes it easier to conduct military operations in the waters.

The dependence by East Asia on the energy that passes through the Malacca strait makes the strait and the SCS both a security and geopolitical concern for China. If they could be able to control the SCS, the East Asian countries – Japan and South Korea – would be totally dependent on China to survive, and the US influence in the region would be crippled. The vast majority of China's imported oil also sails through the Malacca strait (Potter, 2012, p. 1), making the SCS in general a security dilemma for some of the biggest economies in the world. Hu Jintao mentioned also in a speech in 2003 the "Malacca Dilemma", the fear of the strait being blocked by either terrorists or another state seeking to weaken China (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 189).

4.0 Comparing the EU's and China's standpoints

We have now looked at both the EU and China's position and policy concerning the region in and around the SCS. For this part of the text, the focus will be on how they coincide, or if a potential conflict is in the making.

As we have seen, the EU's interest in the region are predominantly economic. This also means that the region affects the EU's security. E.g. if a hostile state or terrorist organization were to take control of the Malacca strait, this would prove disastrous for the EU for two reasons. First, the trade between EU and the East-Asian nations (China, Japan, and South Korea for example) would stop. Some of the EU's biggest trading partners, China, and ASEAN, are situated in the region. Second, as the EU is a normative, "civilian power", its influence on the world stage is predominantly soft power, and its promotion of democracy etc. I.e., the EU would be unable to do anything if the Malacca strait were blocked. In a Chinese perspective, it would be equally terrible if it were to happen, yet the ability of China to respond would be greater.

Since China has been using the cabbage strategy to obtain reefs and rock formations in the SCS, its striking capability has increased as well. This is because China has been building artificial islands in the area and built military bases on them (Phillips, 2018). This has caused worry, especially the western part of the world, as there is uncertainty around China and its motives. The United Kingdom (UK) and France have, along with the US, sent some of its warship to the area to carry out FONOP's. This is, in France's and Britain's view, a way to ensure that China is being kept in check. For the US, these operations are a way to ensure that the rule of law and UNCLOS is respected.

As the EU is looking to ensure the stability and the rule of law in the SCS, it may soon clash with China. This is because China is looking to challenge the geopolitical status quo with the US, especially now that the US is showing isolationistic signs. The littoral states around both the ECS and SCS is looking to improve its relationship with China, and that may be on the expense of its relationship with the US. It is and may continue to be hard to juggle clear relationships with two competing superpowers.

Spykman's theory is even more relevant, when looking at the EU and its hard power. After China launched its BRI project, the SCS became even more economically important for them. Although the BRI is an economic project concerned with creating the Modern Silk Road from China to Africa and Europe, its geo-economic impact is immense. The BRI project main goals, which aims at improving infrastructure in over 70 countries, is to establish an economically interconnectedness between everyone involved. It is slowly reconfiguring the geopolitical social that has been dominant since the Second World War (Forough, 2019, p. 276-277). As could be seen in Europe, the BRI project also reveals the difficulties the EU has when it comes to presenting a united front, especially when dealing with China. This could be seen by, notably Italy, but also Greece joining the BRI project.

Furthermore, the energy-dependence by not only China, but also by other East-Asian countries, leads to the area to become polarized. EU's interests are the stabilization, democratization, and the adherence to the rule of law in the region. This could be thrown away by the littoral state in their pursue of control, leading to a clash of interest between

EU and in this case China⁴. As has been already seen, the UK and France are assisting the US in its FONOs.

As both the EU and China have security concerns in the SCS, disguised as economic interests, they both want a stable area. However, China has shown its disregard for the international laws, notably the China v. Philippines case where China rejected the UNCLOS tribunals verdict. The case examined Chinas forcibly takeover of the Scarborough Shoal in 2013, as well as Chinas historical claim to the 'nine-dash line', among other things. Chinas rejection of the tribunal also means they continue to lay claim to approximately 90% of the water.

The Chinese interests in the SCS is also of geopolitical nature. With control over the water, they gain a substantial amount of influence of the politics of the world, as they would then control a critical SLoC, which almost every corner of the world is connected through. Wirth also writes that territorial disputes and the safety of maritime transports are intertwined in terms of their effect on the international community. This is therefore commonly seen as proof of Chinas challenge to the international law and them limiting the right of freedom of navigation (Wirth, 2019, p. 475-476).

As well as having the geopolitical conflict between China and the US, there is the rising threat of war breaking out between them. This is, between scholars, often referred to as the "China threat". As a totalitarian dictatorship, China's rise of power is a direct threat to the survival of democracy in the world (Broomfield, 2003, p. 265). It is therefore not only in Americas interest to remain as a regional power in the Pacific, but it is also in Europe and the EUs best interest. China has shown its disregard for foreign interference in its domestic policy, saying its American propaganda to try and change China from totalitarian to a liberal democracy (Broomfield, 2003, p. 269). However, the "China threat" theory could also be turned on its head, with China looking at the US as a hegemonic power that only tries to retain its power by containing China (Broomfield, 2003, p. 270). This could be further interpreted as the Island chains, that China is being locked inside by a physical barrier.

5.0 Conclusion

As we have discovered, there are many challenges that contemporary historians, political scientists, as well as politicians, are studying concerning the situation of the SCS. Because of its strategic importance in many ways, the challenges that face the region will determine the outcome of the future.

In this text, we have compared the EU's interests in the SCS to those of China and looked at whether they coincide. Our findings are those of both camps – they do coincide, and they do not. Both the EU and China have crucial economic interests in the SCS. Some of the EU's biggest trading partners are located there – Japan, China, and the ASEAN community. It is clear that security and stability in the region are important for the EU to uphold. However, challenges such as rising tension between China and the other claimants over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, as well as piracy in the region, are creating uncertainty and thus having a unified response to the tensions are difficult for the EU.

⁴ However, even though I use China as an example here, the EU and China is not the only states that could clash, but the EU and other ASEAN countries could also be set up against each other. This is because China is not the only country claiming excessive areas in the SCS.

Furthermore, the EU is struggling because of the prevalent SLoC towards China. Countries such as Greece and Bulgaria are warming up to the Chinese, at the expense of a unified EU. As Greece, through the BRI project, continues receiving a better and more interconnected economy with China, their willingness to take a tough stance towards China disappears.

In addition to its BRI project, China's economic interests are like those of the EU. From 2013, the Xi government launched perhaps its largest project that aims at building infrastructure – among other things – in several countries, as well as aiming to establish an interconnectedness between other countries to the Chinese economy. The SCS is important, because a large part of the Maritime Silk Road travels through the SCS and Malacca strait.

Geopolitically however, the differences are huge for China and the EU. As we have established, the geopolitical conflict between the EU and China directly is non-existent. However, the EU has been largely dependent on the US to maintain peace and stability in the region. With China's rise, the geopolitical status quo is being challenged. Recently, the Chinese have become more assertive with their military being more present, using the cabbage strategy to obtain islands in the Spratly and Paracel Islands. This, along with Donald Trump's policy of isolationism and patriotism, has made the EU uncertain about the future. France and Britain have both sent warships to the SCS to carry out FONOP missions alongside the US. Albeit France is an EU member, in sending warships to the SCS, they have taken a unilateral decision as the EU shows difficulty in presenting a unified front when it comes to China.

Future conflict that includes China and the EU in the SCS is not likely to happen as the EU has shown that it is weak when it comes to China. With weak statements and no proactive action, the EU needs to change strategy from being a normative power, to becoming a military power if it wants to exert influence in the region. China, which seeks to control the SCS, has warned the EU to involve itself in the issues of Southeast Asia and prefers a bilateral approach between China and the countries that it involves.

Looking at the geopolitical aspects of the EU and China concerning the SCS, although concluding that there is no direct geopolitical conflict between the two, it raises the question about the emerging geopolitical conflict between the US and China. Henry Kissinger writes that a study of fifteen cases of where an emerging power and an established power met, ten of those ended up in war (Kissinger, 2010, p. 228). This begs the question; what would be the outcome of the continued conflict between an existing (the US) and a rising (China) superpower? Furthermore, with China's rise to power, concern for the existing international order in the Westphalian system is being challenged.

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