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CHINA'S MARITIME AMBITIONS

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CHINA'S MARITIME AMBITIONS

Abstract:

As the second economic superpower, China has hardened its position in defending its geostrategic interests. This new nationalistic foreign policy has reaffirmed its maritime claims over the Easter Sea and the South China Sea, inflaming dangerous disputes against neighbouring countries. This reorientation of Beijing's diplomacy has shown the will of China for reshaping the established international system. In this path toward a more assertive superpower, China is using more its armed forces and the security apparatus than its soft power, fuelling concern among its neighbours and pushing them into the arms of USA, its biggest rival.

Keywords:

China, Japan, ASEAN, USA, Diaoyu/Senkaku, People's Liberation Army (PLA), South China Sea, Xi Jinping.

***NOTE:** The ideas expressed in the *Opinion Documents* are responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies) or the Ministry of Defense.

China's rapid economic growth in the last three decades has permeated the psyche of both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the majority of the population, in which is settled the belief that the country has earned a superpower status and it must defend its geostrategic interests. This new stage of reaffirmation goes well beyond its territory intensifying maritime ambitions that have aroused the suspicion of its neighbors and encouraged the rivalry with the United States.

"The continuous loss of territory has been one of the deepest wounds in the soul of the Chinese people throughout the century following the Opium War of 1840" said the diplomat Dai Qingli referring to the "red line" that implies the defense of the sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands (in Chinese)/Senkaku (in Japanese) in the East Sea and almost over all the atolls, islands and islets in the South China Sea.

The reaffirmation of Chinese nationalism is based on the "humiliation" inflicted by the Western powers. Beijing is aware of its maritime space vulnerability and its current security and defense strategy is committed to strengthen what it considers its weakest points. Hence, the aspiration of building naval forces capable of repelling any attack against its territory and the interest of ensuring maritime domains that it never effectively controlled.

After the major economic ties developed by China with its neighbors, experts agree that the collapse of Lehman Brothers (2008), with the consequent global financial crisis, brought the Chinese government to take a step forward in the international arena, which implied a marked shift in its foreign policy. The CCP came to the conviction that the international order imposed after the Second World War, in which China had not participated, came to an end and urged the construction of a new multipolar architecture in which China had a lot to say. In this regard, it considered that it was the right time to make use of its diplomacy, its Armed Forces and its security institutions to protect its strategic goals and make them known to the international community. As a result, thereafter, incidents have multiplied in the eastern and southern seas of China until turning the area into one of the hottest spots of the planet.

Barack Obama's decision to move to the Pacific the U.S. defense priorities for the Twenty-First Century only confirmed Beijing's suspicions that Washington intends to "stop its peaceful rise". The new guidelines announced by the White House at the beginning of 2012 were seen by China as a "tactical move" intended to fence it. Months later, the Chinese concern increased due to the deployment of 2,500 marines at a base in Darwin (Northern Australia), and in the words of Leon Panetta, Pentagon's chief, delivered on 1 June of that year in Singapore, about the fact that starting in 2020, 60% of U.S. naval forces will be deployed in the Pacific, that means more aircraft carriers and most of its submarines, cruisers and destroyers.

The strengthening of U.S. military alliances with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam and Australia, all major economic partners of China, was similar to a slap to the CCP, which intensified the distrust between Beijing and Washington and aggravated the feeling of isolation of the new superpower. China does not understand why its neighbors, which depend on it for their economic growth, unite with its rival.

The growing nationalism, not only in China, but also in Japan and other neighboring countries, made the most radical accompany its diatribes with war drums. This strained atmosphere has led some experts to compare it with Europe in 1913 and to remember the catastrophic consequences of the First World War. Others warn about the destabilization and the halt to growth that would mean the explosion of a Cold War in Asia, the most dynamic region in the world.

A decade after Deng Xiaoping's death (1997), recognized as the "architect of China's economic reforms", responsible for the policy that has made China the world's second largest economy, the CCP turned away from the principle on which its foreign policy was based for three decades: "Keep a low profile while you feed your strength". This sentence and the one of "to get rich is glorious"— attributed to the Little Helmsman, although it is unclear when or where he said them—became the hallmarks of Deng and the new China, whose diplomacy had a single "red line": Taiwan, the "rebel island" in which nationalists took refuge after losing the civil war in 1949 and whose independence is anathema.

The attempt of former President Hu Jintao (2003-2013) to build a multipolar world barely encouraged Russia to disrupt U.S. world hegemony and a performance of the Chinese power in the Pacific. His ambition to contain Washington on the other side of the Ocean raised the Pentagon's alarms and unleashed the nervousness among its neighbors.

For more than a decade, the Chinese military budget increases at a double digit annual average. In 2012 it amounted to 80,423 million euro, representing an increase of 11.2% over the previous year. In 2012 China launched its first aircraft carrier and greatly improved the capabilities of the Navy, which has developed and successfully tested a ballistic missile able to sink an aircraft carrier 2,700 miles away. Naval forces have, among others, 60 conventional submarines and six nuclear submarines with cruise missiles.

Beijing claims the military budget increase is a result of its defense needs and rejects Washington critics. China emphasizes that this item of expenditure is barely 1.8% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while the U.S. military budget, with 662,000 million dollars (€500,380 million), is more than six times the Chinese and exceeds 2% of U.S. GDP.

To the anxiety of Japan and Southeast Asian countries not only has contributed Chinese military's modernization but also North Korea's decision to obtain nuclear weapons. According to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), since 2005 there has been a "dramatic increase" in the transfer of weapons to the East and Southeast Asia, including countries that do not maintain territorial disputes with Beijing, which threatens the "fragile peace" established in the bloodiest stage of the Cold War, with Korea (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1955-1975).

Beijing claims sovereignty over more than 80% of the South China Sea, which has an approximate area of 3.5 million square kilometers, with numerous islands, islets, atolls and uninhabited rocks, whose sovereignty is also disputed among the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The disputes are divided into five groups: the Paracel Islands (Xisha in Chinese), the Pratas Islands (Dongsha), the Spratly (Nansha), the Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha), and Scarborough (Huangyan)¹.

Moreover, the CCP claims in the East Sea the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which are protected by the Mutual Defense Treaty between the U.S. and Japan. China lost this small archipelago as a result of the Sino-Japanese War. The reigning Qing dynasty gave to the Empire of the Rising Sun in the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) the island of Taiwan and several islets of its surroundings, such as the Pescadores and the Diaoyu/Senkaku. After the defeat in the Second World War, Tokyo officially recognized in the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) the loss of nearly all its conquests, including Taiwan and the Pescadores archipelago, located near the Chinese coast, territories that were under Chiang Kai-shek nationalist government's control.

The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which are located about 170 kilometers northeast of Taiwan and about 410 kilometers west of Okinawa (Japan), remained under U.S. control as an occupying power and therefore they were not included in the Treaty of San Francisco. In 1972 Washington returned to Japan what was still occupied, which was the island of Okinawa, the adjacent islets and the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. The CCP did not attend San Francisco's settlement negotiations and never accepted them, although the first claims of sovereignty over these islands in dispute were made in the 1960s by Taiwan, which continues insisting that it owns them. Beijing claimed for the first time the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in 1971, through the "People's Daily", the CCP broadcasting body.

¹ Edition note on the topic can be seen at: MACKINALY FERREIRÓS, Alejandro. Chapter XV. Mar Meridional de China. Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2012.

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_geopolitico_2012.pdf

“It is very harsh for the Chinese people to accept that some fellow fishermen are caught in our own waters by a foreign country,” said a Chinese government’s spokesman after an incident in September 2010 between a fishing boat and the Japanese coast guard in the disputed waters. After the collision, the captain was arrested and the crew and the ship were retained, what led to protests and threats from Beijing ending in large demonstrations against the Chinese in Japan when some weeks later Tokyo caved in².

In 2012, the decision of the right-wing former governor of Tokyo Shintaro Ishihara to buy three of the eight islands of the disputed archipelago, which were privately owned by a Japanese citizen, turned the relations with Beijing to a boiling point. The government of the former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda was forced to buy these islets to prevent Ishihara to do so and use them as a platform for anticommunist verbiage —it defends the breaking-off of diplomatic relations with China — and unleash a fire with incalculable consequences.

The triumph by Shinzo Abe of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in last December’s elections provoked fears of an escalation with China. In Japanese politics, Abe is considered a “hawk”: “I promise to protect the land and the Sea of Japan and the lives of the Japanese people no matter what happens” he repeated during the election campaign. However, in the 11 months of its previous government (2006-2007) he did not hesitate to undertake certain flights of “dove” that improved the difficult Tokyo relations with its Chinese and Korean neighbors.

As a partner on the other side of the East Sea, Abe came across the new Chinese leadership that took office in March, after his rise to the CCP leadership in November 2012. Xi Jinping, in the closing speech of the National People’s Congress that appointed him as head of State, made an emotional appeal to the “great revival of the Chinese nation”, that he considered the “biggest dream” of its 1,350 million inhabitants.

Everything seemed to provide an escalation in the conflict after one of the warmest autumns between the two countries, with dozens of anti-Japanese demonstrations in many Chinese cities. However, both have managed so far to calm the turbulent waters that separate them.

Xi Jinping, the most charismatic leader who heads China since Deng Xiaoping, seems to have returned to the policy of the late leader of not raising his voice and putting the effort to strengthen the weak points. Since he became the General Secretary of the CCP and chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission he has visited some of the most important PLA barracks and he has harangued the command and the troops to “intensify their capacity for real combat.” Xi referred to the new challenges facing the world’s largest army, with 2.3 million troops, “in the information age” and ordered to “improve the ability

² Edition Note on the subject can be seen at:

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_informativos/2011/DIEEEI02-201MineralesCriticosREE.pdf

to fight in regional wars". But above the external notes of the speech was a tough internal warning to the PLA to increase their professionalism, fight corruption and improve instruction³.

Abe, meanwhile, maintains the policy with which he achieved in its previous government to pacify the angry protests of its neighbors: not publicly visiting Yasukuni Shinto shrine, which guards the souls and the names of the 2.5 million fallen Japanese people in recent wars, including 14 convicted war criminals after the defeat of 1945.

The dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which have large fisheries resources has worsened since the experts indicated that under the water there are rich deposits of natural gas. China began in 2003 to explore a gas field near the area and Japan followed a year after, after many scuffle, negotiations from both countries in June 2008 reached a tentative agreement for joint exploration of the field of Chunxiao (Chinese)/ Shirakaba (Japanese), as well as the establishment a joint development zone that would traverse the "mid line between Japan and China", which although China does not recognize, it divides the exclusive economic zones of the two countries. The deterioration of the situation prevented the signing of the agreement, although both governments seem convinced that it would be beneficial for their people and boost peace in the area.

Regarding the situation in the South China Sea, there are certain connotations with the East Sea, resulting from the change in the strategy of China's foreign policy and efforts by Beijing to tackle the vulnerability of sea space. This sea is one of the most important waterways in the world, which moves most regional trade and transportation of oil, so that in case of conflict, it could easily strangle economic growth in China. The South China Sea connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

According to the Observatory of Chinese politics, the first published map which details all these islands dates back to 1935. In the following, from 1948, it was delimited by a "nine-dotted line" the maritime border with a "U" form, which China claims and whose legitimacy received no response from any country for years. It adds that the Middle Kingdom has "historical records" of the discovery of these islands during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) and rules of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) about sailing and fishing in the area.

³ Edition note: For further information on the Chinese Defense plans:

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/Resena_LibroBlancoChina_abril2013.pdf
http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/ResenalEEE-AnnualreportCongress2013China_31may2013.pdf

Until 1974, no one put into question the “nine-dotted line” drawn by Beijing. The only islands with capacity to host population, the Paracelsus, were then inhabited some by Chinese people and others by South Vietnamese people. Beijing took advantage of Saigon government’s delicate situation —which was about to fall,— to expel civilians, liquidate the military contingent and take over the entire archipelago. Since the reunification of Vietnam, Hanoi claims sovereignty over the whole of the Paracels and the Spratlys, and considered Chinese occupation “illegal”.

It was since the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 when the tensions began in the South China Sea, due to sovereign-seeking claims of several coastal States and the overlap of these. The UNCLOS delimits the maritime areas to facilitate navigation rights and protect resources. The most important are: the Exclusive Economic Zone (200 nautical miles from the coast), the Contiguous Zone (24 miles) and the territorial waters (12 miles).

The first confrontation between China and the Philippines occurred in 1995 due to the Mischief Reef. But it was the clear alignment with the United States of Benigno Aquino III, after his electoral victory of 2010, what has set up the swords of Manila and Beijing. The attempt of the former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to mediate the conflict and the boost to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—to which belong four involved countries: Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei —, to commit itself to the peaceful resolution of disputes that only served to unnerve China.

As it is the case in the East Sea, the South China Sea is rich in fishery resources and under its waters there are large unexplored pockets of oil and gas reserves. But if the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are important because the CCP considers them part of the same agreement by which the Qing Dynasty lost Taiwan. The People’s Republic strategists agree that without control over the many islands, islets and rocks of South China sea it is impossible to deploy a naval force capable of defending the strategic interests of a superpower.

China insists that disputes are bilateral issues, that it wants to solve with each of the countries involved without involving international institutions, and much less Washington. ASEAN considers urgent to avoid an escalation and urged those involved to peacefully resolve their disputes.

The fact that more than half of world merchant fleet and a third of crude oil transportation travels through the South China Sea over the year, in addition to many fishing vessels, submarines and ships of different navies, and numerous patrol of different State and regional organizations raises concerns about a possible collision and a potential conflict break out.

To avoid potential catastrophic results of a lack of coordination between the various agencies and institutions operating in the South China Sea, the National People's Congress, during the plenary held last March, reinforced the already powerful features of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), attributing some of the skills that the Fisheries Administrations, the Coast Guard of the Ministry of Public Security, the General Administration of Customs and the Maritime Safety Administration once had. Thus, the SOA became the first civilian branch of the Central Administration for all activities in the southern sea and to enforce China's claims for sovereignty.

Especially in the last two years, tension has been very strong between the Philippines and China over the Scarborough archipelago. The Philippine Foreign Ministry came to report that "the Chinese are trying to establish a de facto occupation" in the area. After several clashes both in the archipelago and in the Spratly islands, some of which Manila also claims, Aquino's government took its disputes with Beijing before the International Court of Justice.

When after the Tiananmen massacre in June 1989, the West turned its back on China the CCP found in ASEAN a way to break their isolation, Singapore —despite not maintaining diplomatic relations with Beijing— was its main mentor. Singapore, as well as Indonesia and the ASEAN 1991 itself established formal relations in 1991. The CCP did not forget the gesture and in 1998, when a terrible financial crisis hit Southeast Asia, these weakened economies found China's doors open. Then a "golden decade" began, that has made China the ASEAN largest trading partner with a volume of business that is expected to end 2013 with around 360,000 million dollars.

China and ASEAN —comprises 10 countries: the Philippines, Myanmar (Burma), Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei —signed in 2002 a Free Trade Agreement. Moreover, in these years have been institutionalized and multiplied their contacts in other associations such as ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and South Korea), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Community or ASEAN +6, which also includes India, Australia and New Zealand. This is, without doubt, the most diverse of communities, founded at the behest of China, who tried unsuccessfully to lead it.

En 2002, in the midst of the decade of flourishing relations between ASEAN and China, a document was signed calling for the implementation of a code of conduct of the parties in the South China Sea. ASEAN considers it vitally important to ensure traffic in the area and the increase of trade and economic relations. China, however, seems to have no interest in fulfilling the commitment, despite repeated calls from the other countries.

"Postponing China's negotiations with ASEAN to conclude according to the consensus based on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea legally binding was probably wrong and counterproductive, because it has damaged relations with most countries in Southeast Asia, pushing them towards its greatest strategic rival, the United States, in addition to damaging

China's image among its neighbors and increase the risk of conflict in the Asia-Pacific area", notes in an essay for the University of Hong Kong, Juan Manuel López Nadal, one of the most experienced Spanish diplomats in Southeast Asia.

For the "Chinese dream" to come true, Xi Jinping will have to combine the country's maritime ambitions with good neighborly relations, which will facilitate the consolidation of China as a superpower. The dialogue is essential in the multipolar world that Beijing aims for the Twenty-First Century.

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ⁱ ***NOTE:** The ideas expressed in the *Opinion Documents* are responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies) or the Ministry of Defense.