



STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: BEYOND GEOGRAPHY

BY KIE KANG

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AI trade policy must balance the technology's benefits with its potential risks. Source: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Historically, China has argued over the South China Sea (SCS), which has an estimated [11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural](#)

[gas. The area has competing claimants, including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.](#) From the [1970s, China occupied the entire Paracel Islands](#) after dislodging South Vietnam and occupied 6 features of the Spratly Islands countries in the [1980s](#), which possess rich natural resources and fishing areas. [In the 1990's](#), China started to occupy Mischief Reef and from the [2010s](#), China conducted rapid and large-scale reclamation and infrastructure building in the South China Sea (SCS). In 2024, South Korea expressed concerns over China's use of water cannons against Philippine ships. In response, a Chinese spokesperson from the ministry explained that exterritorial countries should not become troublemakers on the issue. That is, China considers ASEAN countries to be the stakeholders regarding the South China Sea issues, yet considers South Korea and other countries as exterritorial. Therefore, it is necessary to think which country can be classified as a stakeholder regarding South China Sea (SCS) issues.

To help advance the region's common interests in a free, open and rules-based maritime order, The Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea 2024 was held from November 6 to November 8. In the Dialogue, leaders, academics, officials, and influential foreign policy experts from not only Southeast Asia, but also Indo-Pacific gathered and discussed some methods of promoting adherence to international law and identifying sound, pragmatic, and actionable policy prescriptions and recommendations surrounding the South China Sea for keeping the regional peace and stability in this region. At this dialogue, coast guard organizations discussed the increasing the prevalence of gray-zone coercion in territorial seas. The other panel discussed the perspectives from claimant states – the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia's concept of rules-based order vis-à-vis the South China Sea. Furthermore, external actors from the Indo-Pacific countries and Europe shared their perspectives on the South China Sea. Overall, diverse panels from various countries expressed their concerns on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea resulting in heightened tensions. Then, they suggested some possible cooperations among like-minded countries.

Now is the time to think about the importance of freedom of navigation for all the countries, not only ASEAN countries which are adjacent to the South China Sea geographically. Maritime security is of vital importance to the South China Sea, because this area is a critical sea route for maritime transport to East Asian countries. If the South China Sea is blocked by the activities from the Chinese Navy, then ship operations in East Asia will be restricted and these states will be negatively viewed by other states.

For example, trade is significant for [South Korea's economy; the combined value of exports and imports equals 78 percent of GDP](#). Currently, South Korea is the world's 11th largest economy in terms of nominal GDP, the 5th largest exporter and the 9th largest importer. Therefore, masses of raw materials, and components enter Korea along major maritime trade routes. Many materials and technologies produced by South Korean companies are also exported through the major maritime transport routes. From these trade routes, South Korea has made tremendous economic gains during the past four decades, transforming itself from a recipient of foreign assistance to a high technology manufacturing powerhouse and middle-income donor country in the span of two generations.

Thus, sea routes are strategically important because they allow massive amounts of goods to travel long distances in a cost-effective way. In fact, about 90% of global trade happens via maritime transport, and the goods transported include as raw materials like oil and coal or finished products like smartphones. If some troubles happen at sea routes, this trouble can cause serious damage, not only affecting trade among ASEAN countries, but also the entire global trade system.

Some like-minded countries express their deep concerns by the latest dangerous actions taken by the Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels near South China Sea, with insisting the UN Charter, UNCLOS, and other relevant international rules and regulations relating to the safety of life at sea, which include prohibition on the use of force or coercion, and the freedom of navigation. However, the South China Sea issue is not just a matter of ceremonial

values, but also a matter which is directly related to national interest.

Therefore, not only ASEAN, but also like-minded countries which are geographically remote have to simulate a scenario regularly to prevent unexpected contingencies in the South China Sea (SCS). Through this process, these countries need to think about the value of the South China Sea beyond its noble value by considering national interests, which are supported by imports and exports by volume on maritime transport.

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