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**Maritime disputes in East Asia and Pacific region**  
– stormy waves of international relations

**Abstract**

The paper portrays the overall political–military situation in East Asia with the focus on security challenges which are involving major regional powers, namely China, Japan, Russia and South Korea. The paper outlines the regional implications of current maritime disputes as a major dynamic of security concerns in East Asia. The main attention is given to territorial disagreements involving China as a major power in the region. Also smaller nations are mentioned as the disputes are strongly influencing their foreign policy and forcing their development of defence capabilities. Additionally, the US position toward regional matters is provided as the nation is playing a significant role there as an ally or potential opponent for many countries.

**Key words:** East Asia, maritime disputes, China, US shift to Pacific

**Introduction**

Asia is relatively quiet continent as for now, but it could change in the future. This is as there are many developments and disputes there which could evolve into crisis situation in a very short period of time. The stability in the broader sense is fragile and when the world powers are preoccupied with emerging and ongoing threats in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan and also in Europe, major Asian nations are enhancing instruments of their national power. It could be recognized as an indicator of their concerns about future security but also their will and preparedness to shape the future according to their vision of regional and international order. So, recognizing the high potential for a change in the current sensitive situation and carefully observing each other, the leading Asian powers, and also the US constantly present in Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> Opinions expressed by the author are his own views and they do not reflect in any way the official policy or position of the Baltic Defence College, or the governments of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania.

region, are progressively investing into military instruments of power to ensure continuity of economic development to meet their leadership and citizens' expectations. At the same time the military power is a toll to preserve national position within the political landscape of the continent. The important factor in that domain is the need to develop force projection capabilities to defend respective countries, to strengthen deterrence factor and also to possess long range attack abilities to strike any opponent from a distance. Maritime disputes among East Asian nations are a strong impetus for military build-up and special attention is given to air force and navy and other land based long-range weapon systems; nuclear forces are also among priorities but rather as a deterrence factor. Such developments are especially visible in the allocation of resources and weapon procurement in China, Japan, and Russia, but also it is linked with the US strategic shift from Europe into the Pacific region.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the regional implications of current maritime disputes as a major dynamic of security concerns in East Asia. The main attention is given to territorial disagreements involving China as a major power in the region. However, the Taiwanese state of affairs is not discussed throughout as it is a long-term international dispute based on the division of one nation as the result of civil war. The initial research is supporting the thesis that there are at least three reasons for Beijing to constantly advance their regional interests in relation to small islands. First, it is supporting the security of the vital east part of the country which is a hub of national industry and is vulnerable from any attack from the sea. Next, if ownership could be proven and accepted it could result in China having full control of vital sea lines of communication, which are critical not only for Japan and South Korea but also for the US Navy's freedom of movement. Finally, potential, but still not fully estimated, resources under the seabed could be important for each nation's economy. The military instrument is the most visible part of disputes forcing military modernization in the region. Analysis of selected maritime disputes will allow for the recognition of bilateral and multilateral motives leading to synthesis of results in broader spectrum.

The paper portrays the overall political–military situation in East Asia with the focus on security challenges which are involving major regional powers, namely China, Japan, Russia and South Korea. Also smaller nations are mentioned as the disputes are strongly influencing their foreign policy and forcing their development of defence capabilities. Additionally, the US

position towards regional matters is provided as the nation is playing a significant role there as an ally or potential opponent for many countries.

### **Regional developments**

The geopolitical changes in Asia are an important topic of debate, and the US shift into the Pacific region has drawn the attention of the world. The regional maritime disputes and conflicts are noted by major news agencies as they have potential to develop into regional struggle for power. It is especially important as there are two growing powers there, namely China and India, ready to take the lead in the region when their period will come and capabilities will be there to make it happen. The directions of possible confrontation could be triggered by internal and external factors and they are not fully predictable. Moreover, Russia, as a Eurasian country, having intensive political and economic relations with the continent and exploiting resources for national purposes, is also an important actor. It is also, as mentioned, the arena of renewed US interests, followed by building and rebuilding alliances in the region to face potential competitors for the leader's position on the global arena. US presence is key for a few nations involved in sea related arguments, especially for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan as their military security is strongly relying on the superpower capabilities and support within formal alliances. Smaller nations, recognizing the growing ambitions and capabilities of Beijing, are also looking around for any reliable option to enhance their security status. For them, improving relations with Washington looks like the most reliable option as for now. Moreover, the nations are strengthening regional relations and also developing links with European nations, though those are rather distant partners. The regional dynamics mentioned above are causing the major players to watch each other and to try to extend influences and to boost capabilities in all the dimensions of national instruments of power. It is also strongly related with enhancing capabilities to preserve national security and integrity avoiding any external influences. Additionally, is it related to geostrategy linked with states borders recognized by Jakub Grygiel as "*the main variable influencing geostrategy.*"<sup>2</sup> According to Grygiel "*states seek above all else to protect the territory from invasions and attacks, and state borders are a good measure of territorial security. When state borders are threatened or unstable, the state must concentrate its efforts on*

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<sup>2</sup> J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, the John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2006, p. 36.

*preservation of its territorial integrity and is unable to pursue an effective foreign policy far from its territory.*”<sup>3</sup> The perception of vulnerability of the Chinese east coast linked with being afraid of containment is causing real concerns and involvement in disputes to push the possible threat out the shoreline. The containment threat is not new, Henry Kissinger explains in his book ‘*On China*’ that such endangerment was already recognized by Mao and was linked both with the Soviet Union and US, and it has been grounded on popular Chinese game ‘go’ or ‘weiqi’<sup>4</sup>. The essence of the game is to surround an opponent and it has been read by politicians as strategic containment and such the perception of the threat is still present.

Among instruments of power the military one is very visible and is linked with other nations’ immediate recognition, triggering their countermoves. The modernization processes cause accusations about the aggressive posture of a country toward its neighbours and are speeding up the arms race in Asia. Is it the consequence of seeing a more powerful nation advantage over others as potential source of threat and encouragement to forward its national interests in expense of smaller and weaker actors. Currently, especially US involvement is influencing the overall situation, including its attempt to build military bases and strengthen alliances, and is causing the major regional actors to rethink their status to be ready to enhance national security and readiness to face unwanted development of internal political, economic or social situation. The US will not step back and will continue reinforcing multi-vector capabilities and alliances as stated by President Obama and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when discussing Asia–Pacific region: “*its development is vital to American strategic and economic interests.*”<sup>5</sup>

### **China and Japan – major regional players in East Asia**

Bilateral relations between China and Japan are a real source of possible conflict in the region. The tensions are linked, among others, with a dispute related to small islands on the East China Sea - Diaoyu in Chinese or Senkaku in Japanese. The dispute is not only connected with natural resources and sea lines of communication but also with national prestige as both Beijing

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> H. Kissinger, *O Chinach* (On China), Polish edition translated by M. Komorowska, Czarne Company, Wołowiec 2014, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, Parameters No 44 (2) summer 2014, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks 2014, p. 12.

and Tokyo want to be recognised as a capable regional power, strong enough to impose national will; Beijing also has global ambitions. The area has seen many incidents involving aircraft and vessels and it reached a new level when in November 2013 China unilaterally announced establishing the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), covering most of the East China Sea, “*with the aim of safeguarding state sovereignty, territorial land and air security, and maintaining flight order*”<sup>6</sup> as stated by defence ministry spokesperson. It was strongly condemned by many countries including: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and USA. Japan’s foreign affairs minister recognised that “*setting up such airspace unilaterally escalates the situations surrounding Senkaku islands and has danger of leading to an unexpected situation*”<sup>7</sup> warning about the possible threat to peace. Especially Washington was nervous about it and just two days after the announcement, two strategic bombers B-52 made an undisturbed flight over the ADIZ.

The tensions between two Asian nations are not new and both are recognizing the possibility of confrontational scenario. According to polls, 54% of Chinese population and 29% of Japanese population is afraid of a war between those two powers in the nearest future.<sup>8</sup> The anti-Japanese moods are additionally linked with historical massacres like the Nanking Massacre committed by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War in December 1937. Those memories are still alive and they are cultivated, so reminding of that aspect of history would be rather easy and could be exploited by propaganda when required. The tensions are heated up by the US position related to disputes, as the White House is treating Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as territory administrated by Tokyo and acknowledges them as the integral part of security concerns within US – Japan security treaty. The statement is important for Japan as Russian actions in Crimea and its annexation could be a case used by China to do the same.

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<sup>6</sup> *China establishes ‘air-defence zone’ over East China Sea*, BBC News Asia, 23 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25062525> [accessed: 14 October 2014].

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ponad połowa Chińczyków obawia się wybuchu wojny z Japonią* (More than half of Chinese is afraid of war with Japan), IAR, Polish Press Agency – PAP 10 September 2014, <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1329,title,Ponad-polowa-Chinczykow-obawia-sie-wybuchu-wojny-z-Japonia,wid,16874772,wiadomosc.html> [accessed: 14 October 2014].



Fig. 1. Maritime disputes in the East Asia and Pacific.

Source: prepared by the author using: East Asia Political map 201. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/txu-pclmaps-oclc-780028873-asia\\_east\\_pol-2011.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/txu-pclmaps-oclc-780028873-asia_east_pol-2011.jpg) [accessed: 26 October 2014].

The important fact that has raised tensions was the sea trial of helicopter carrier JS Izumo (DDH 183), being the largest Japanese naval vessel since Second World War; it is officially classified as helicopter destroyer. It was condemned by China’s ministry of defence, as “*This trend is worthy of high vigilance by Japan’s Asian neighbours and the international community*” and “*Japan should learn from history, adhere to its policy of self-defence and abide by its promise of taking the road of peaceful development.*”<sup>9</sup> It is supported by an assumption that the JS Izumo could be potentially considered as an aircraft carrier which would be against Japanese

<sup>9</sup> H. Gye, A. Bond, *It looks like an aircraft carrier, it sounds like an aircraft carrier... but the Japanese are adamant their biggest ship since WW2 is a ‘flat-topped destroyer’*, Daily Mail Online 06 August 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2385430/Japan-warship-Izumo-aircraft-carrier-flat-topped-destroyer.html> [accessed: 08 November 2014].

constitution banning possession of 'war potential' (senryoku).<sup>10</sup> It will join the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) in 2015 and its sister vessel is supposed to be operational in 2017. The vessels could carry up to 14 helicopters but also a marine battalion (400 troops) and 50 combat vehicles. There are some comments that it could be transformed into a real aircraft carrier as Japan is to acquire from USA F-35 and V-22 Osprey, however there are so far no plans to buy strike carrier capable F-35B version. As for now, in the context of islands disputes "*China is thus likely to be most concerned about the Izumo enhancing Japan's ability to check Chinese naval power projection into Japan's maritime defensive perimeter, rather than the possibility of it projecting military power onto the Chinese mainland*".<sup>11</sup> The decisive position regarding the dispute is not to be changed but both are still not ready for open confrontation. It is a result of internal and external constraints, including: limited military specific capabilities to face each other, Chinese and USA deterrence factors (including nuclear potential), the people and international pressure (expectations) and economic interests.

Taiwan has similar concerns to Tokyo, being afraid of future military solution of the long-term disagreement with China. Taiwan is a very interesting case as it is related to air force projection within offensive and defensive counter air (OCA, DCA) capabilities to achieve at least a favourable air situation in support of navy's denial and amphibious operations enabling land forces to conduct landing and further operations in hostile territory. The main assumption of both Taiwanese and USA planners was that their air superiority will secure independence of Taiwan in the case of any invasion from the mainland by annihilating surface fleet and amphibious assault forces.<sup>12</sup> However, the research released by RAND Corporation already in 2009 convincingly questions this perception as "*the United States and Taiwan can no longer be confident of winning the battle for the air in the air. This represents a dramatic change from the first five-plus decades of the China-Taiwan confrontation. Limiting the amount of air-delivered punishment inflicted on Taiwan demands new concepts and capabilities to hold the PLAAF at bay*".<sup>13</sup> It is requiring a

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<sup>10</sup> C. Wallace, *Japan's war potential and the case of the Izumo 'destroyer'*, EastAsia Forum, 05 September 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/09/05/japans-war-potential-and-the-case-of-the-izumo-destroyer/> [accessed: 08 November 2014].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> T. Yoshihara, J. R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific. China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 2010, pp. 209-210.

<sup>13</sup> In details read: D. A. Shlapak, D. T. Orletsky, T. I. Reid, M. S. Tanner, B. Wilson, *Question of Balance. Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute*, RAND National Security Research Division, Santa Monica 2009, p. 131.



revision of strategies and also a closer look into air power as an enabler of any attempt to attack or defend the island. The growing capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), especially navy and air force, are slowly closing the military capabilities gap between China and US. It will cause Washington allies, including Taiwan, to carefully reconsider their national defence strategy. It is doubtful if the US Navy will risk declaring its readiness to enter the Taiwan Strait as happened during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, especially as for now according to former Pacific Air Forces Commander General Carlisle "*resources have not yet been made available to key elements of the policy due to other commitments*".<sup>14</sup> National reunion will stay among the fundamentals of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign policy, but as for now Taipei will be pressured by other than military means.

### **Bilateral and multilateral maritime disputes**

The territorial disputes on the South China Sea are another major source of hostilities in the region and there are no easy solutions in hand. Among them Spratly and Paracel Islands are key elements of disagreements, especially as China is continually presenting decisive approach in relation to its rights there.<sup>15</sup> The islands are not only economically important as they also have military importance allowing better reach of air force and navy by constructing bases and airfields. An example is the extension of the 2,400 m-long runway on Woody Island, which is the largest one among the Paracel Islands, as the strip will increase up to some 2,700-2,800m. It will significantly extend the air force's reach and air defence options and it will enhance safety for PLA Air Force (PLAAF) including especially strategic level assets like bombers H-6 and also transport aircraft e.g. Il-76. The runway and improved harbour will "*enhance Woody Island's utility as a military base from which to project power in the South China Sea*".<sup>16</sup> The project is an example of the overall effort to move military capabilities forward to create more reliable options to defend the Chinese mainland. The same construction works are ongoing also on Spratly

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<sup>14</sup> M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> For details about maritime territorial disputes in East Asia read: B. Dolven, S. A. Kan, M. E. Manyin, *Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), Washington 30 January 2013, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42930.pdf> [accessed: 28 October 2014].

<sup>16</sup> J. Hardy, *China expands runway, harbour at Woody Island*, IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, London 24 August 2014, [http://www.janes.com/article/42538/china-expands-runway-harbour-at-woody-island?utm\\_campaign=%5bPMP%5d\\_mpc6110\\_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2009\\_02\\_2014\\_DW\\_Deployment&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=Eloqua](http://www.janes.com/article/42538/china-expands-runway-harbour-at-woody-island?utm_campaign=%5bPMP%5d_mpc6110_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2009_02_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua) [accessed: 28 October 2014].

Islands and it is an important factor from military point of view as the operational range of PLA aircraft will increase reaching all the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) nations and US allies in the region. Even presently there are incidents in the South China Sea airspace and it is linked with US Navy patrols and reconnaissance missions to monitor the status of Chinese island base construction. The flights are occurring in the vicinity of the Hainan Island, which is the important PLA Navy (PLAN) Submarine Base, including basing strategic nuclear submarines.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1. Islands occupied by respective countries with Spratly Islands.**

No.	Country	No of occupied islands	Number of troops, installations
1	China	7	260, a few helicopter landing pads
2	Philippines	8	480, air strip (1300m.)
3	Vietnam	24	600, air strip (600 m.)
4	Malaysia	3	70, air strip (600 m.)
5	Taiwan	1	100, helicopter landing pad

Source: Z. Śliwa, *Bezpieczeństwo regionu Azji Południowo-wschodniej a roszczenia terytorialne wobec wysp Morza Południowochińskiego* (Southeast Asia Security and Territorial Disputes Over the South China Sea's Islands), Research Paper No 2 (181), Naval Academy, Gdynia 2010, p. 113.

The South China Sea disputes are involving a few nations, which is complicating the situation. Moreover, Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam are members of ASEAN, which is grouping relatively smaller South-East Asian Nations and all of them are concerned about China, and also India in the long-term. Those nations have not been unified in their common approach toward Beijing especially as China was trying to engage them on bilateral base to exploit it for their own purposes. Nevertheless, *“progress on the bilateral front does not undermine, deny, or contradict any multi-lateral or international framework, but rather creates new opportunities to bring those organizations and platforms into the talks and to incorporate them into bilaterally accepted decisions”*.<sup>18</sup> The complicated situation has been supporting improvement of relations between Washington and those smaller actors and attempts to unify efforts.

An example of cooperation is the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between US–Philippines signed on 28 April 2014. The EDCA *“provides a legal framework for*

<sup>17</sup> Main assets are: Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft and Lockheed P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft.

<sup>18</sup> M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 20.

*the increased rotational presence of US armed forces in the Philippines. The precise details of when, how many, what types and the location of this rotational presence will be worked out in the future. This may well prove to be a test case of the ability of the US to rebalance its forces in Southeast Asia.*”<sup>19</sup> The agreement could be seen by Beijing as the deterrent tool in relations to the South China Sea’s disputes as Manila alone is not strong enough to face any escalation of the situation in the region and ASEAN as the organisation is not capable to support it militarily.

Nevertheless, there is a slow change in organisational perception of China, and it was presented by joint communiqué issued by the foreign ministers of the ASEAN member nations during the organisational forum in Myanmar in August 2014. Previously there was no common voice of members and they were even preventing each other from making joint statements related to Chinese assertive policy towards the maritime domain as happened in 2012 during ASEAN summit. This time the language was tougher within the statement: “*we urged all parties concerned to exercise self-restraint and avoid actions which would complicate the situation and undermine peace, stability, and security in the South China Sea and to settle disputes through peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force*”.<sup>20</sup> The regional fragility, especially as the economic situation is a challenge for all ASEAN nations, is causing significant challenges for them, forcing the reconsideration of the approach to the West. They are deliberating three possible approaches: ‘balancing’, ‘bandwagoning’ or ‘networking’. The first is asking for alliance with dominant power like US and the essence is linked with the determination “*to avoid domination by stronger powers*”<sup>21</sup> to balance too strong influences posed by regional countries like China or India. Bandwagoning is based on belief that “*states will tend to ally with rather than against the dominant side*”.<sup>22</sup> The networking option is another solution allowing the building of links between one another to synchronize efforts, exchange information creating synergy effect. The growing importance and potential of leading Asian nations is causing smaller ones to make very serious decisions about making a choice and selecting a course of action which

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<sup>19</sup> For details of the EDCA read: C. Thayer, *Analyzing the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement*, The Diplomat 02 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/analyzing-the-us-philippines-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/> [accessed: 28 October 2014].

<sup>20</sup> J. Hardy, *Analysis: ASEAN finds voice over South China Sea dispute*, IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly, London 14 August 2014, [http://www.janes.com/article/42006/analysis-asean-finds-voice-over-south-china-sea-dispute?utm\\_campaign=\[PMP\]\\_PC6110\\_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2008\\_19\\_2014\\_DW\\_Deployment&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=Eloqua](http://www.janes.com/article/42006/analysis-asean-finds-voice-over-south-china-sea-dispute?utm_campaign=[PMP]_PC6110_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2008_19_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua) [[accessed: 08 November 2014].

<sup>21</sup> Read about both theories: S. M. Walt, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*, the MIT Press, International Security, Vol. 9, No. 4 Spring, 1985, pp. 3-43.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

is more suitable for their national aims especially as they “*don’t want to be bullied just because we’re small.*”<sup>23</sup> It is important as many nations are suffering economic stagnation, political instability, social unrest, growing crime as it makes them very vulnerable and susceptible to external influences. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalism and religious radicalism are influencing all domains of national existence and they are rather anti-West in nature. All the factors mentioned above could be destabilising dynamics for each single nation with regional and even global impact. The threats are observed by dominant powers as respective nations' geostrategic location is playing big role in their considerations within regional games.

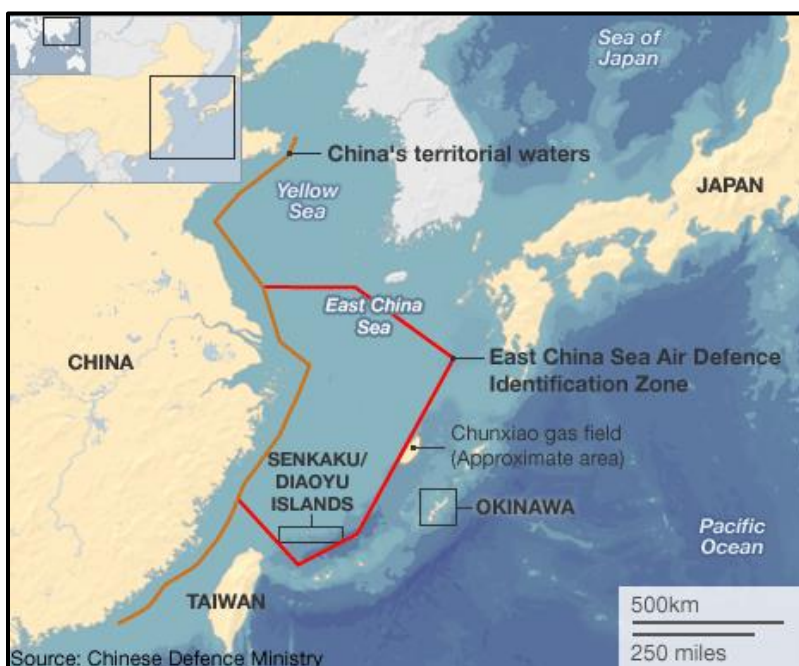


Fig. 2. **The East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone.**

Source: *China establishes ‘air-defence zone’ over East China Sea*, BBC News Asia, 23 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25062525> [accessed: 14 October 2014].

The Chinese ADIZ, mentioned previously, also irritated South Korea as both nations are in an argument about Ieodo, a submerged rock inside a Korea’s territorial line. The rock as such is not the main issue, but is related rather to the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and protection of Seoul’s interests. Whoever possesses that tiny island could extend its EEZ, so “*it’s important to discuss it so that people know why it is so strategically important*”.<sup>24</sup> The statement is based on concerns that if Ieodo would belong to China it would control access to the Yellow Sea. It is not

<sup>23</sup> J. Hardy, *Analysis: ASEAN finds voice over South China Sea dispute*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Kim Young-jin, *Why Ieodo matters*, the Korean Times, 18 September 2012, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117\\_120266.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117_120266.html) [accessed: 14 October 2014].

acceptable to South Korea and it is linked with economy, sea lines of communication linking Seoul with outer world, freedom of navigation for Korean and US Navy, and also could be a disadvantageous factor in relations with North Korea. As an answer for Chinese ADIZ, South Korea also decided to expand its 62 year-old Air Defence Identification Zone. The decision was noticed by Beijing but surprisingly without major condemnations and it is related to the perception of South Korea in the region, as *“like China, the US and Japan don’t see South Korea as a rival, and they are more willing to accept its security moves. Still, there’s a limit to this rather paternalistic view of South Korea, ..., should South Korea cross the line in its relationship with China, China could retaliate by disrupting economic ties or by stirring up trouble with North Korea”*.<sup>25</sup> That case is interesting as the US armed forces presence in South Korea could trigger a major test if Seoul became more aggressive trying to challenge Beijing, especially as North Korea could be also a strong nuclear card to play.

There is another international dispute between Russia and Japan. However, the Arctic, being rather cold area, is slightly warming relations between the two countries. As Japan is a huge importer of energy sources, the North Sea Route (NSR) is of growing importance as it *“cuts the travel time from Hamburg to Yokohama by about 40 percent compared to the Suez route, with fuel savings of 20 percent”*<sup>26</sup> and other costs e.g. insurances. As there are tensions with China (Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands) the NSR is providing a reliable option, although distant in time, as a transport route. The disputes related to the Southern Kurils (Russia) or the Northern Territories (Japan) will still be there but economic interest could overcome differences. The joint efforts were presented when Japanese explorer Inpex Corporation signed an agreement with Rosneft in May 2013 to explore two Russian oil fields in the Okhotsk Sea and Moscow supported Tokyo’s candidacy for the 2020 Olympic Games. The cooperation is important for Russia as it is supporting bypassing EU sanctions when looking for highly desired technologies. Moreover, by building new LNG terminals it could have direct access to the Asian market, which is hungry for resources, without a need to build expensive pipelines. The warmer relations with Russia are important for Tokyo not only because of economic reasons, as ongoing maritime disputes with China are allowing Japan to focus on that important issue related to national interests, and also

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<sup>25</sup> S. Tiezzi, *China Is Surprisingly OK with South Korea's New ADIZ*, The Diplomat, 10 December 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/china-is-surprisingly-ok-with-south-koreas-new-adiz/> [accessed: 14 October 2014].

<sup>26</sup> S. Pourzitakis, *Japan and Russia: Arctic Friends*, The Diplomat (01 February 2014), <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/japan-and-russia-arctic-friends> [accessed: 02 August 2014].

prestige within Asia. The bilateral relations between Russia and Japan are also a factor shaping the dynamics on international relations in the region creating some sympathy among countries based on pragmatic politics.

### **Chinese growing assertiveness**

The maritime disputes' dynamics are evolving especially as "*China has become increasingly assertive of its claims to disputed maritime territories in the East and South China Seas, and remains committed to a relatively high rate of military spending to project its power into the region in the coming years.*"<sup>27</sup> Consequentially, it is resulting in the reaction of all other actors linked with that subject of international relations. However, for China maritime disputes are part of larger concept, which is linked to the extension of control of sea lines of communication by enhancing friendly relations and supporting building navy infrastructure and ports along Asian south coastline. This is the reason why also India is afraid of Chinese considerations related to the Indian Ocean and is even recognising involvement into antipiracy on Somali waters as an excuse to penetrate the ocean.<sup>28</sup> So, although "*China is not yet on the scene but given the pace of its naval modernization, energy interests and quite clearly articulated goals, it is inevitable that it will seek to be and Indian Ocean played before long.*"<sup>29</sup> The Indian Ocean is important factor for global trade being a critical 'commerce highway', so control of sea lines of communication there is important to all Asian economies.<sup>30</sup> It is recognised by Robert Kaplan, who sees that China "*wants to secure port access throughout the South China Sea and adjacent Indian Ocean, which connect the hydrocarbon-rich Arab-Persian World to the Chinese seaboard.*"<sup>31</sup> The rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi is peaceful, but the enlargement of navies' and air forces' abilities to project power is an attribute that could cause willingness to challenge the opponent in the future.

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<sup>27</sup> M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> T. Yoshihara, J. R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific...*, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> P.S. Das, *India's Strategic Concerns in the Indian Ocean*, South Asia Defense and Strategy Yearbook, ed. Rajan Arya, New Delhi 2009, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> The role of sea lines of communications is also outlined in: Z. Sliwa, *China's Strategic Growth Sustainment: Accidental Leader?*, Connections, The Partnership for Peace Consortium (PfPC), Fall 2010, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany 2010, pp. 17-35.

<sup>31</sup> R. D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and The Battle Against Fate*, Random House In., New York 2012, p. 199.



Fig. 3. Location of selected facilities with Chinese capital along Asian south coastline.

Source: *The Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 2008*. United States Joint Forces Command, Suffolk 2008, p. 28.

Such threats are further stressed by closer cooperation between Russia and China, as for now highlighted by enormous gas agreements and Moscow's will to export more weapon systems to their partner. It is specifically related to the worsening relationship of Russia with the Western nations and US, leading Moscow to look for closer cooperation with Beijing. As for now both are united in a collective security organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), being a forum of fighting the three evils of "separatism, terrorism and religious extremism" but also showing new capabilities. For instance, during the last exercises "Peace Mission 2014" both presented potential to plan and execute combined small joint operation. It was a large scale military training in Inner Mongolia in China involving some 7000 soldiers coming from land, air and also special forces.<sup>32</sup> It was a practical visualization of good relations between nations, especially as China was rather voiceless regarding the situation in Ukraine, and Russia is supposed to do the same in relation to maritime disputes. They just need each other in the current situation and besides recent gas deals are proving it clearly.<sup>33</sup> The Russian factor also has very practical importance as better relations mean reduced threat to land borders and it is allowing the

<sup>32</sup> Y. Smityuk, *SCO exercise Peace Mission 2014 to involve 7,000 troops*, Shanghai 19 August 2014, <http://en.itar-tass.com/world/745617>, [accessed: 23 October 2014].

<sup>33</sup> A.Luhn, T. Macalister, *Russia signs 30-year deal worth \$400bn to deliver gas to China*, the Guardian 21 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/21/russia-30-year-400bn-gas-deal-china> [accessed: 10 November 2014] and also A.Anishchuk, *Russia, China ink framework deal on second major gas supply deal*, Reuters 09 November 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/11/09/us-china-russia-gas-idUKKCN0IT0GL20141109> [accessed: 10 November 2014].

shifting of resources to development of the PLA Navy and Air Force, as those are key services for the maritime domain.

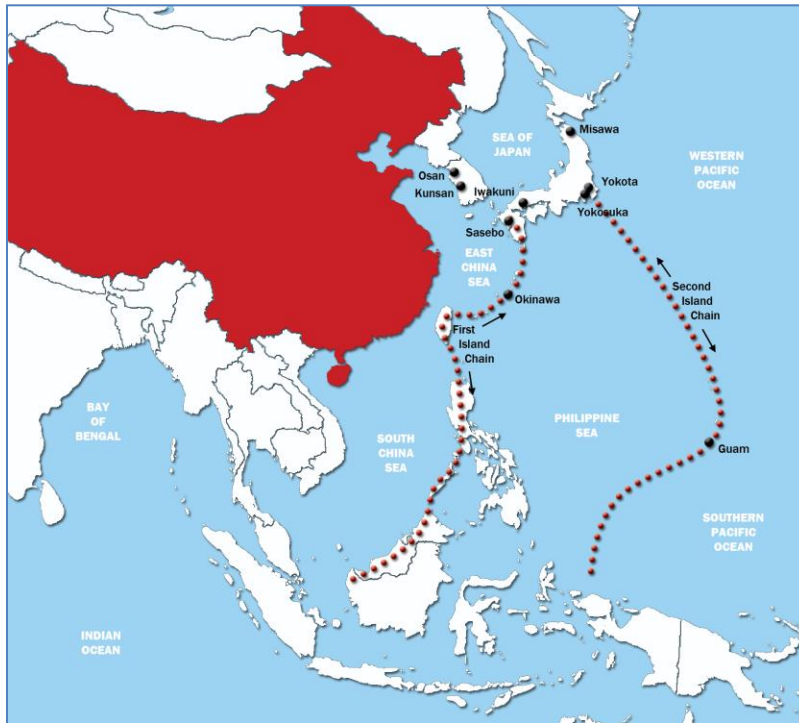


Fig. 4. The First and Second Island Chains concept.

Source: J. van Tol, M. Gunzinger, A. Krepinevich, J. Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure - Operational Concept*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington 2010, <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/> [accessed: 20 October 2014].

It is also important that China has made an effort during recent years to make agreements in relation to land borders, and only the one with India remained not resolved. Those treaties were important for Beijing as a precondition for a more insistent ‘shift toward maritime domain’. The border issues were recognized by Jakub Grygiel as for him “*the stabilization of China’s land borders may be one of the most important geopolitical changes in Asia of the past few decades. From a tense frontier similar to that of Ming China is turning into a stable one that does not require an enormous expenditure of military strength or political attention. This might free China from having to devote resources and attention to its land borders, allowing it to pursue a more aggressive maritime geostrategy.*”<sup>34</sup> The maritime dispute in the South China Sea and the East China Sea are crucial to extend power within so called “two island chains”, underpinning broadening of military reach, as according to PLA those “*two key island chains as forming the*

<sup>34</sup> J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, op. cit., pp. 169 – 170.



*geographic basis for expanding China's maritime sphere of influence. While these have not been formally defined as such by PLA leaders, the "First Island Chain" is generally thought to run from the Japanese main islands through the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, thus roughly bounding the East and South China Seas. The "Second Island Chain" stretches from the north at the Bonin Islands southward through the Marianas, Guam, and the Caroline Islands, encompassing the western Philippine Sea".<sup>35</sup>*

The growing concerns among smaller nations about PLA development were visible in a research performed by the Pew Research Centre; people in a few Asian countries in spring 2013 were asked if they thought "China's growing military power is a good thing or a bad thing for [their] country." Perception of danger coming from Chinese military growth was recognized by 96% of Japanese, 91% of South Koreans but "Australia and the Philippines were next, at 71 percent and 68 percent. After that, however, there is a marked drop-off in concern over China's military. Indonesia had 39 percent say China's military power was a bad thing, Malaysia 20 percent, and Pakistan (a longtime friend of China's) a mere 5 percent."<sup>36</sup> The results are visualization of affiliations in the region especially in relation to cooperation with US. But for example, Pakistan is formally an ally of US but in reality that collaboration is rather troubled so China is seen as historical partner, even in the context of India and territorial disputes in Kashmir. Moreover, compared to other nations Beijing is rather far away from Islamabad and is not seen as a danger. The result of the research proved that there are differing perceptions of China in Asia, linked with national interests, history and also geography.

As for now those small disputed islands and bigger ones such as Taiwan, Philippines and Japan are significantly restricting freedom of movement of PLA Navy (PLAN) giving strategic advantage to the powerful US Navy and its allies. Currently PLAN is under constant development, investing in aircraft carrier and capable submarine fleets, but it will take time to match the capabilities presented by the US and also the Japanese Navy. PLAN's development is part of the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) concept which could be defensive in nature but is also representing offensive capabilities and as for now has been created rather to improve security and

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<sup>35</sup> J. van Tol, M. Gunzinger, A. Krepinevich, J. Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure - Operational Concept*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington 2010, p. 11, <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/> [accessed: 10 November 2014].

<sup>36</sup> S. Tiezzi, *China's Growing Defense Budget: Not As Scary As You Think*, The Diplomat 05 February 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/chinas-growing-defense-budget-not-as-scary-as-you-think/> [accessed: 14 November 2014].

to present abilities to challenge in the nearest future other competitors on the high seas. Taiwan and also other islands are an important factor for China as it is connected with its concepts of enforcing the protection of the vulnerable east coastline, which is of vital importance for national well-being. In that context all the disputes are making sense and the long-term visionary undertaking is acknowledging that to achieve its aims, Beijing will follow a proactive policy towards regional adversaries. For China, the US factor, connected with overwhelming navy capabilities to impose maritime blockade, is the real concern but Beijing also has strategic patience coming from the rich and long history of the Middle Kingdom.

### **The Pacific shift of US – rebalance of Asian policy**

US commitment to Asia was strongly emphasized during the annual Asia Security Summit organised in Singapore in May 2014 by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS). Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel said that in relation to Asia “*diplomatic, economic, and development initiatives are central to the rebalance, and to our commitment to help build and ensure a stable and prosperous region,*” however “*prosperity is inseparable from security, and the Department of Defense will continue to play a critical role in the rebalance, even as we navigate a challenging fiscal landscape.*”<sup>37</sup> The statement was also linked with a warning to other regional powers, as “*the choices are clear, and the stakes are high*” and linking the speech with islands related territorial disputes he said, that “*it’s not about a rocky island or even the oil beneath the sea, he said, but rather is about sustaining the Asia-Pacific’s rules-based order, which has enabled the people of this region to strengthen their security, allowing for progress and prosperity.*”<sup>38</sup> To achieve such security and prosperity according to Hagel “*From Europe to Asia, America has led this effort for nearly seven decades,..., and we are committed to maintaining our leadership in the 21st century.*”<sup>39</sup> Washington’s assurance is rather an important factor as many nations, not only those mentioned above, are relying on USA as security guarantor when facing an unpredictable future. Nevertheless, “*having bound their fortunes inextricably to America, Japanese leaders monitor shifts in U.S. policy and strategy carefully, looking for signs*

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<sup>37</sup> J. Garamone, *U.S. to Continue to Lead in 21st Century, Hagel Says*, American Forces Press Service, Singapore 30 May 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122373> [accessed: 10 November 2014].

<sup>38</sup> J. Garamone, *U.S. to Continue to Lead in 21st Century*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

*of abandonment*".<sup>40</sup> The same applies to other nations, which are basing their security on an alliance with the world's dominant military superpower. For the US, the main goal is to avoid being rejected from Asia by an antagonistic block of nations or just one nation, and the shift to the Pacific is just an adaptation to new circumstances based on the well rooted tradition that Americans are not only Atlantic but also Pacific nation.<sup>41</sup>

In the Pacific region there is another actor – Australia, as a US ally. The country, although far-off, is more active and is investing in the air force and navy capabilities to enhance its contribution to the overall security of the region. Lately it signed a contract worth 143mln USD with Boeing to acquire four P-8A Poseidon aircraft, which will significantly increase abilities to patrol open sea and to engage submarines.<sup>42</sup> The fact could be linked with growing capabilities of the Chinese navy, which, among other priorities, are recognizing the importance of the development of submarine fleet. In general "*some countries, notably US allies, Japan and the Philippines, have become more vocal in their objections to Chinese maritime claims and more convinced of their need for American military support as maritime disputes unfold. Indeed, US allies appear to perceive the rebalancing as designed to put them on a more equal footing to resolve their disputes with China -- and not leave them to face rising Chinese power alone.*"<sup>43</sup> The Australian example is showing that, again, disputes are not only about islands, it is rather about growing perception of nations that if not interrupted, the arguments could spread quickly in any direction. The US factor is a game changer, however it must be linked with credible support by purposeful and convincing build capabilities in relation to all instruments of power to ensure that commitment is not only temporary. Especially as any evidence of weaknesses could result in rebalance of foreign policy of a small nation and could harm alliances. The situation is complicated for USA as in the past the focus was on containing Soviet Union, mainly in Europe, and now has reallocated focus to contain Chinese expansion into Pacific. The war in Ukraine is again asking it to reconsider the future of its presence in Europe as a credible and most powerful member of NATO.

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<sup>40</sup> T. Yoshihara, J. R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*..., op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>41</sup> H. Kissinger, *O Chinach* (On China), op. cit., p. 532.

<sup>42</sup> M. Dura, *Samoloty patrolowe Poseidon dla lotnictwa USA i Australii*, Defence24.pl 19 August 2014, [http://www.defence24.pl/News\\_samoloty-patrolowe-poseidon-dla-lotnictwa-usa-i-australii](http://www.defence24.pl/News_samoloty-patrolowe-poseidon-dla-lotnictwa-usa-i-australii) [accessed: 24 October 2014].

<sup>43</sup> M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 13.

## Conclusions

Arms race in Northeast Asia is already ongoing and territorial disputes related to sea domain and land borders are an important dynamic which has caused a 17% rise of arms sales during last 5 years in relation to the continent. They have had differing background behind it and they are driven by respective nations' strategies. For China it is linked with national ambitions and also core interests; at the same time other nations, especially Japan and South Korea, will not stay behind in weaponry procurement and will not give up any disputed territory, which is important for national pride and credibility of the respective governments. As the same smaller nations are unable to compete in that rivalry they have no other choice but to look for balancing options by closing ranks with outside powers (US) or within international organisations (ASEAN). They are also using any opportunity to promote their interests and present possible threats using other forums. The arms race is visualized by defence spending related especially to air force and navy, in which PLA is in the lead compared to regional allies of the US, namely Japan and South Korea. Among the spending: power projection, amphibious and expeditionary capabilities, which are not purely defensive in nature, are priority; they could be easily used to solve islands' disputes by implementing joint air – sea assets warfare concepts.

For China, the US position is and will be rather a challenge as the nation has no reliable and strong ally in Asia. So, the country has been rather silent toward Moscow support for separatists in Ukraine as it is rather necessary as potential partner not an enemy. Moreover, China needs a modern weapon system for all the services and Russia has for them a reliable offer in relation to all the services. As for now China is observing the military reorientation of US armed forces in the Pacific region and also Washington's effort to tighten relations with coalition partners there: Japan, South Korea, and Australia. It is paralleled with the White House attempt to make closer relations with the Association of South-East Asian Nations, India and other smaller nations in the region, which is linked with their geostrategic location. USA involvement in the Asia-Pacific region is *“creating another intangible factor that could be both stabilizing and destabilizing in contextual manner”*.<sup>44</sup> At present its military presence in Afghanistan is an important security factor and it will be extended beyond 2014 causing other major players to

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<sup>44</sup> S. Kainikara, *Security Challenges to South-East Asia and the Prospects of Conflict*, edited version of the paper presented at the 4th Annual National Security and Strategy Workshop in Perth on 9 November 2012., p. 3. <http://airpower.airforce.gov.au/Publications/Details/509/Security-Challenges-to-South-East-Asia-and-the-Prospects-of-Conflict.aspx> [accessed: 24 October 2014].

observe the developments there. It is also linked with observing allocation of reasonable resources in Asia to stay involved there in the long-term and to ground influence allowing the shaping of the security situation when facing other emerging powers looking for regional dominance. European nations are currently preoccupied with tensions on the continent. Their involvement in Asian affairs is rather cautious and there are limited tools to influence them, but more attention should be given to that region as in every case Europe will be hit by and disturbances there.

The role of Washington in the region is growing and the country's leadership is also not clear about which strategy to select: a hawkish or 'softer' one. As for now, the military build-up, strengthening alliances, supplying new weapon systems to friendly nations is suggesting that harder policy proponents are winning; nevertheless the country is still trying to play the role of arbiter. The economic exchange with the region and especially China's factor is playing a role in the middle approach to region, but expectations of allies are growing when facing political and territorial challenges. The danger is that an unexpected incident could cause regional conflict and Washington would be automatically involved if one of allies were to be engaged and maritime disputes are such the possible case which could inflame the whole region.

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