

# MARITIME DISPUTES IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGION – THE STORMY WAVES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**Col (ret) Zdzislaw SLIWA<sup>1</sup>, PhD**  
Baltic Defence College, Tartu, Estonia

## **Abstract**

*The paper portrays the overall political–military situation in East Asia with a 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 them to develop defence capabilities. Additionally, the US position toward regional matters is outlined, 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 a relatively quiet continent as for now, but it could change in the future. This is because there are many developments and disputes there which could

<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.

evolve into crisis situations in a very short period of time. 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 the instruments of their national power. This could be seen 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, recognising the high potential for change in the current sensitive situation and carefully observing one another, the leading Asian powers, and also the US being constantly present in the Pacific region, are progressively investing in military instruments of power to ensure continuity of economic development to meet their leadership and citizens' expectations. At the same time, military power is a toll to preserve national position within the political landscape of the continent. The important factor in this domain is the need to develop force projection capabilities to defend respective countries, to strengthen deterrence factor, and also to possess long range attack capabilities 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 the 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 this is also 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 supports 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 to 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 the disputes forcing military modernisation in the region. Analysis of selected maritime disputes will allow for the recognition of bilateral and multilateral motives leading to synthesis of results in the broader spectrum.

The paper portrays the overall political–military situation in East Asia with a 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 outlined, 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 attracted the attention of the world. The regional maritime disputes and conflicts have been noted by major news agencies as they have the potential to develop into a 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 time comes and the 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, an arena of renewed US interests, followed by the building and rebuilding of alliances in the region to face potential competitors for the leader's position in 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 reliant on the superpower's capabilities and support within formal alliances. Smaller nations, recognising 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 relationships 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. This is also strongly related to enhancing capabilities to preserve national security and integrity, avoiding any external influences. Additionally, is it related to the geostrategy linked with states' borders, recognised by Jakub Grygiel as "*the main variable influencing geostrategy*."<sup>2</sup> According to Grygiel, "*states seek, above all else, to protect their 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 preservation of its territorial integrity and is unable to pursue an effective foreign policy far from its territory.*"<sup>3</sup> The perception of the vulnerability of the Chinese east coast, linked with fear of containment, is causing real concerns and involvement in disputes to push the possible threat out to the shoreline. The containment threat is not new. Henry Kissinger explains in his book '*On China*' that such endangerment was already recognised by Mao and was linked both with the Soviet Union and US and it has been grounded on the 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, as 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 modernisation processes cause accusations about the aggressive posture of a country towards its neighbours and are speeding up the arms race in Asia. This is a consequence of seeing a more powerful nation gain advantage over others as a potential source of threat and encouragement to forward its national interests at the expense of smaller and weaker actors. Currently, US involvement is considerably 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

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

3 Ibid., p. 36.

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

face the 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 the Asia–Pacific region: “*its development is vital to the 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 other things, with a dispute related to small islands in 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 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 the establishment of 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 a 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 the danger of leading to an unexpected situation*”<sup>7</sup> warning about the possible threat to peace. Washington was especially nervous about it and just two days after the announcement, two strategic bombers B-52 made an undisturbed flight over the ADIZ.

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

6 *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].

7 *Ibid.*

The tensions between two Asian nations are not new and both are recognising the possibility of a confrontational scenario. According to polls, 54% of the Chinese population and 29% of the Japanese population is afraid of a war between the 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. These memories are still alive and they are cultivated, so a reminder 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 the disputes, as the White House is treating Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as territory administrated by Tokyo and acknowledges them as an integral part of security concerns within the 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.

The most important fact that has raised tensions was the sea trial of helicopter carrier, JS Izumo (DDH 183), being the largest Japanese naval vessel since the Second World War; it is officially classified as a 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 the Japanese 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 can carry up to 14 helicopters and also a marine battalion (400 troops) and 50 combat vehicles. There have been some comments that it could be transformed into a real aircraft

<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].

<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].

<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].



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].

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

carrier, as Japan is to acquire it from USA F-35 and V-22 Osprey; however, there are so far no plans to buy the capable F-35B version strike carrier. As for now, in the context of the 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. This 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 a 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 the 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 already released by RAND Corporation 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> This requires a 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 the navy and air force, are slowly closing the military capabilities gap between China and the US. It will cause Washington’s allies, including Taiwan, to carefully reconsider their national defence strategy. It is doubtful that the US Navy will risk declaring its readiness to enter the Taiwan Straits, 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*

<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.

*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 to hand. Among them, Spratly and Paracel Islands are key elements of disagreements, especially as China is continually presenting a 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 a better reach for the 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 among the Paracel Islands, as the strip will increase by 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 the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) including, especially, strategic level assets like H-6 bombers and also transport aircraft e.g. Il-76. The runway and improved harbour will "*enhance Woody Island's usefulness 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 also ongoing on Spratly Islands and this is an important factor from the 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

<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%20SECUIRTY%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%20SECUIRTY%2009_02_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua) [accessed: 28 October 2014].

airspace and this 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 an important PLA Navy (PLAN) Submarine Base, including housing strategic nuclear submarines.<sup>17</sup>

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 Południowocchińskiego* (Southeast Asia Security and Territorial Disputes Over the South China Sea's Islands), Research Paper No 2 (181), Naval Academy, Gdynia 2010, p. 113.

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

The South China Sea disputes involve a few nations, which is complicating the situation. Moreover, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam are members of ASEAN, which is a grouping of relatively smaller South-East Asian Nations, and all of them are concerned about China, and also India, in the long-term. These nations have not been unified in their common approach toward Beijing, especially as China has been trying to engage them on a bilateral basis to exploit them 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 organisations and platforms into the talks and to incorporate them into bilaterally accepted decisions”*.<sup>18</sup> This complicated situation has been supporting an improvement of relations between Washington and these 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 the increased rotational presence of US armed forces in the Philippines. The precise details of when, how many, what types and the location of*

<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.

*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 disputes, as Manila alone is not strong enough to face any escalation of the situation in the region and ASEAN, as an organisation, is not capable of supporting it militarily.

Nevertheless, there is a slow change in the organisational perception of China, and this was presented in the 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 coming from 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 the ASEAN summit. This time, the language was tougher within the statement: "*we urge 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 a reconsideration of the approach to the West. They are deliberating three possible approaches: 'balancing', 'bandwagoning' and 'networking'. The first asks for an alliance with a dominant power like the US and its essence is linked with the determination "*to avoid domination by stronger powers*"<sup>21</sup> to balance the over strong threat posed by regional countries like China or India. Bandwagoning is based on the 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 synchronise efforts and exchange information

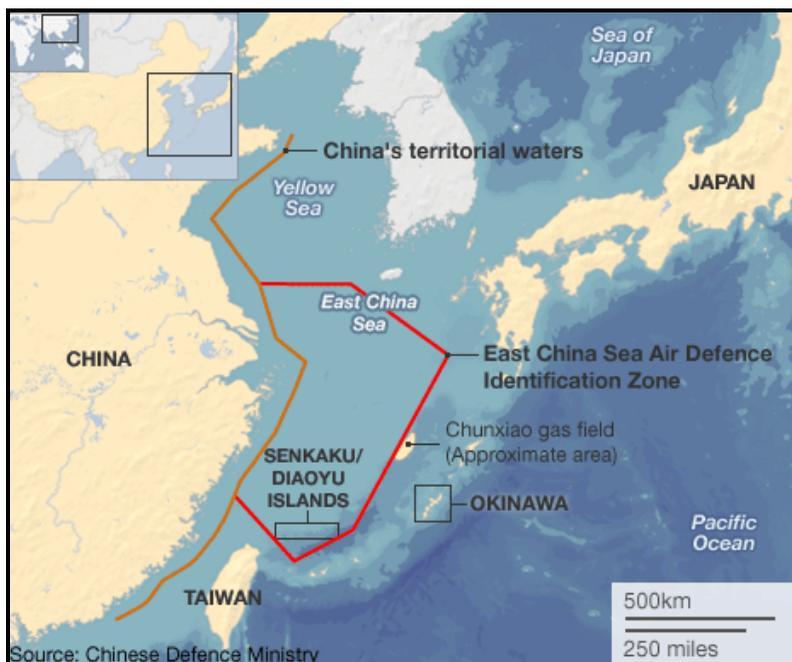
<sup>19</sup> For details of the EDCA read: C. Thayer, *Analyzing the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement*, The Diplomat 02 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/analyzing-the-us-philippines-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/> [accessed: 28 October 2014].

<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.

creating a 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 is more suitable for their national aims, especially as they “*don’t want to be bullied just because we’re small.*”<sup>23</sup> This is important as many nations are suffering economic stagnation, political instability, social unrest, growing crime, which 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 the respective nations’ geostrategic location is playing a big role in their considerations within regional games.



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].

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

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

The Chinese ADIZ, mentioned previously, also irritated South Korea, as both nations are in an argument about Jeodo, a submerged rock inside 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 Jeodo belonged to China it would control access to the Yellow Sea. This is not acceptable to South Korea and is linked with the economy, sea lines of communication linking Seoul with the outer world, freedom of navigation for the Korean and US Navy, and also could be a disadvantageous factor in relations with North Korea. As an answer to 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 this 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> This 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 also have a strong nuclear card to play.

There is another international dispute between Russia and Japan. However, the Arctic, being a 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. insurance. As there are tensions with China (Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands), the NSR is providing a reliable option, although distant

24 Kim Young-jin, *Why Jeodo 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].

25 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].

26 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].

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. This 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 the 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 this important issue related to national interests, and also prestige within Asia. The bilateral relations between Russia and Japan are also a factor shaping the dynamics of international relations in the region, creating some sympathy among countries based on pragmatic politics.

## China's 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 has brought forth a reaction from all the other actors linked with this subject of international relations. However, for China, maritime disputes are part of a 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 Asia's southern coastline. This is the reason why India is also afraid of Chinese considerations related to the Indian Ocean and is even recognising involvement in 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*

27 M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 13.

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

modernization, energy interests and quite clearly articulated goals, it is inevitable that it will seek to be an Indian Ocean player before long”.<sup>29</sup> The Indian Ocean is an 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> This 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 the abilities of their navies’ and air forces’ to project power is an attribute that could cause willingness to challenge the opponent in the future.



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

**Fig. 3. Location of selected facilities with Chinese capital along Asia's southern coastline**

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

<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.

worsening relationship of Russia with the Western nations and the 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), which is a forum for fighting the three evils of “separatism, terrorism and religious extremism” but which also shows new capabilities. For instance, during the last “Peace Mission 2014” exercises, both showed the potential to plan and execute a small combined 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 visualisation 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 clearly proving it.<sup>33</sup> The Russian factor also has very practical importance, as better relations mean reduced threat to land borders and allows the shifting of resources to development of the PLA Navy and Air Force, as these are key services for the maritime domain.

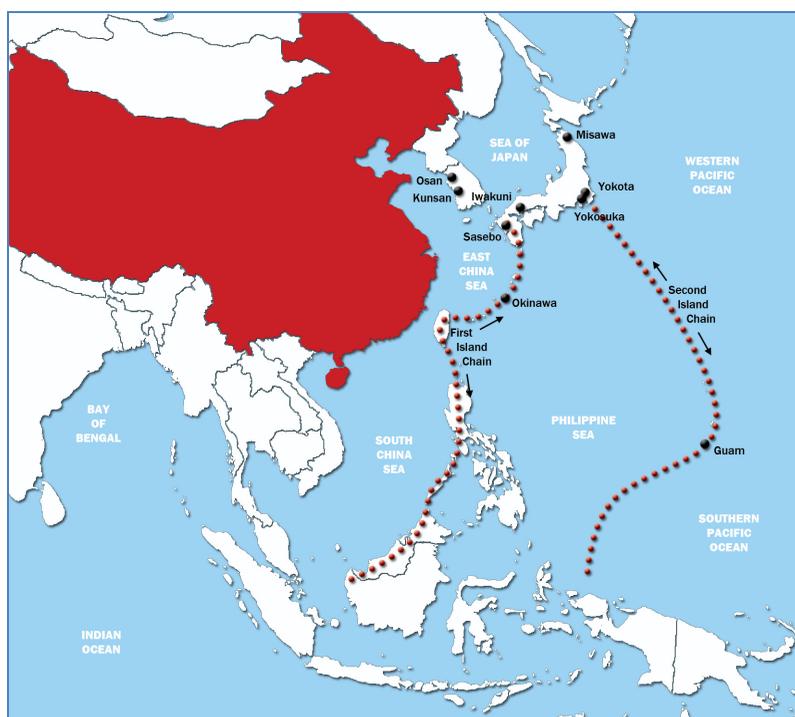
It is also important that China has made an effort during recent years to make agreements in relation to land borders, and only the one with India remains unresolved. Those treaties were important for Beijing as a precondition for a more insistent ‘shift toward maritime domain’. The border issues were recognised by Jakub Grygiel, as for him “*the stabilisation 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, it 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 extending power within the so called “two island chains”, underpinning the

32 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].

33 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].

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

broadening of military reach, as, according to PLA, those “two key island chains form the 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 bordering 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>



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].

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

<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].

The growing concerns among smaller nations about PLA development could be seen in 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.” The perception of danger coming from Chinese military growth was recognised 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 a reflection of affiliations in the region, especially in relation to cooperation with the US. But, for example, Pakistan is formally an ally of US, though in reality that collaboration is rather troubled so China is seen as an 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 results 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 the bigger ones, such as Taiwan, Philippines and Japan, are significantly restricting the 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 carriers 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 also represents offensive capabilities and, as for now, has been created rather to improve security and to present abilities to challenge other competitors on the high seas in the nearest future. Taiwan, and also other islands, are an important factor for China, as this 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 make sense and the long-term visionary undertaking acknowledges that, to achieve its aims, Beijing will follow a proactive

<sup>36</sup> S. Tiezzi, *China’s Growing Defense Budget: Not As Scary As You Think*, The Diplomat 05 February 2104, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/chinas-growing-defense-budget-not-as-scary-as-you-think/> [accessed: 14 November 2014].

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 emphasised 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,, 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, rely on the 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 of abandonment.*”<sup>40</sup> The same applies to other nations, which are basing their security on an alliance with

37 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].

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

39 Ibid.

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

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 an Atlantic, but also a 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 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> This could be linked with the growing capabilities of the Chinese navy, which, among other priorities, recognise the importance of the development of a 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, but rather about the growing perception of nations that, if not interrupted, 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 building of 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 the rebalance of the foreign policy of a small nation and could harm alliances. The situation is complicated for the USA, as in the past the focus was on containing the Soviet Union, mainly in Europe, and now has reallocated focus to contain Chinese expansion in the 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.

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

42 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].

43 M. Sprangler, *Rebalancing the Rebalance*, op. cit., p. 13.

## Conclusions

The 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 the last 5 years in relation to the continent. They have had a differing background behind them and are driven by respective nations' strategies. For China, this is linked with national ambitions and also core interests; at the same time, other nations, especially Japan and South Korea, will not lag behind in weaponry procurement and will not give up any disputed territory, which is important for national pride and the credibility of the respective governments. As the same smaller nations are unable to compete in this 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 visualised by defence spending, especially related to air force and navy, in which PLA is in the lead compared to the regional allies of the US, namely Japan and South Korea. Among the expenditure: power projection, amphibious and expeditionary capabilities, which are not purely defensive in nature, are a priority; they could be easily used to solve the island disputes by implementing joint air – sea assets warfare concepts.

For China, the US position is, and will be, something of a challenge, as the nation has no reliable and strong ally in Asia. So, the country has been rather silent toward Moscow's support for separatists in Ukraine, as it is rather necessary from a potential partner not an enemy. Moreover, China needs a modern weapon system for all services and Russia has a reliable offer for them in relation to all of them. As for now, China is observing the military reorientation of the US armed forces in the Pacific region and, also, Washington's effort to tighten relations with coalition partners there: Japan, South Korea, and Australia. This is paralleled with the White House's attempt to have 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. US involvement in the Asia-Pacific region is *“creating another intangible factor that could be both stabilising and*

*destabilising in a 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 observe the developments there. It is also linked with observing the allocation of reasonable resources in Asia to stay involved there in the long-term and to influence 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 this region as, in every case, Europe will be hit by any 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, and 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 the China factor, is playing a role in the middle approach to the region, but the 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 their allies were to be engaged, and maritime disputes are a possible case that could inflame the whole region.

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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].

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