

THE EFFICACY OF FONOPS IN COUNTERING CHINESE EXPANSIONISM

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of civilization, the human race has been involved in one or the other form of trade. In the contemporary world, trade occupies a significant position in the formation of foreign policy. As the significance of trade increases, the demand for safe and secure maritime passage increases. Therefore, it becomes required for states to acquire influence over such maritime routes. On the other hand, several ideologically motivated agendas such as the Chinese policy of expansionism pose a direct threat to such maritime routes and hamper the interest of other countries in the region of the South China sea. Adding to this, China exploits the South China sea in order to acquire huge amounts of marine food to address its large consumption. Hence, it becomes necessary to safeguard the interest of such nations and preserve marine biology from such exploitative and expansionist processes. As it is practically impossible for such regional countries to secure their ambitions from the expansionist policies of Beijing, the intervention of the United States, to safeguard the interests of its allies, becomes inevitable. However, it is still insufficient to deal with China, especially in the South China sea. Therefore, in this paper, we will understand how the American policy of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea has contributed to counter such Chinese expansionism.

To dwell deep into the naval and political situation developing in the region of the South China sea, it is important to understand the motive behind such a position from Beijing. Hence, we will understand how the expansionist policy of Beijing works and its strategic perspective. Further, we will see the importance of American presence for providing some resistance to such policy, by understanding the FONOP operations of the former in the region. Moving on, the paper dwells on the challenges faced by FONOP as well as the significance it possesses in countering Chinese expansionism.

CHINESE POLICY OF EXPANSIONISM: A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

China, since the rule of the Qin dynasty, has perpetuated the phenomena of expansionism and to date, the modern-day People's Republic of China, governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has stuck to the notion of expansionism. China backs its policy of expansionism by playing the victim card and claiming the territories by stating them to be long-lost Chinese territory lost to British, Dutch, or Russian colonies over time. Yet, the motive behind

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expansionism has varied from time to time. In the medieval era, it was a battle for existence. During the war against Japan, it was for the upholding of Chinese culture. And in the recent era, the race for centrality in international politics, regional dominance, and greed for dominance over mineral-enriched regions have acted as the motive for China to ascertain its age-old policy of expansionism.

China, having a huge economy as well as a military power, uses a salami-slice strategy to establish geopolitical influence and to expand its territory as well as a maritime influence across a vivid range of arenas (Kandhari 2020). The term ‘salami-slice tactics’ was coined by a famous Stalinist Communist Matyas Rakosi, meaning a divide and conquer policy with the help of huge military (by threats) and economic power (debt traps). Adding to it, the active foreign policy and mega-projects like BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) have fuelled the Chinese ambition of dominance and expansionism. With such economic powers, China tends to provide huge loans to developing or under-developed nations and in return acquires certain areas of the nation depending on China’s interest in the region. One such example is of the country of Sri Lanka, located in the Indian Ocean. Due to the Chinese debt trap, the country was forced to hand over its port of Colombo to Chinese authority and only Chinese visas are valid on the port, abandoning Sri Lankans from their land and subsequently making it a Chinese colony in the Indian ocean (ANI 2021). Such acts are an abuse of maritime safety and security and it also compromises free navigation.

Not only through monetary powers, but China also uses its military powers to threaten several countries sharing maritime boundaries with China in the South China Sea. Although the Chinese agenda of abusing the sovereignty of neighbouring states via military intervention is not something new. After acquiring Tibet in 1949, China had its border extended to the Himalayas and it now shares a long border with India. India, the Asian giant and direct competitor of China in the region has constantly been the victim of such military harassment from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), also known as the Chinese Army. Since the Sino-Indian war in 1962, India has shared a border dispute with China on various grounds. Even several Indian states, such as the state of Arunachal Pradesh have been claimed by the Chinese Communist Party. In recent attempts, China tried to conquer Indian territory, resulting in various stand-offs in Doklam, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh. Not only with India, but China also shares its land border disputes with Bhutan, Nepal, and Russia, making it clear strategic greed for unreasonable expansionism (Kandhari 2020).

China’s ambition and seriousness for the expansion are perhaps most evident in the South China Sea. With several interests in the region such as the importance of fishing, the significance of trade routes in the region, and the availability of oil in the regional ocean, China has its claim over the region. It has resulted in naval as well as diplomatic confrontation with countries like Taiwan (Republic of China), Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, and Australia. Since 2013, the Chinese PLA has restored island-building in the Spratly and Paracel Islands region to extend its maritime reach to an unreasonable limit. Such

an act hampers the interests of the countries mentioned above. It also challenges American dominance and significance and therefore the American response, as well as interference in the political scenario of the South China Sea, becomes inevitable (Herscovitch 2017). Therefore, to defend the American interests as well as to safeguard the interests of allies of America, there was an urgent need for a diplomatic policy that can effectively counter Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Such an urge triggered the need for the formation of a foreign policy to counter such expansionism and to ensure free and safe navigation, resulting in FONOP.

WHAT IS FONOP?

The United States of America, since the outset of the 20th century, has been an advocate for free maritime passage. Yet, with the world getting divided into developed and developing nations, the former demands better access to the maritime sail and to explore the sea, whereas the latter seeks to protect their offshore resources. Such greed for dominance in the water might result in chaos. Hence to form a better consensus between the nations and to create a safe passage, the United Nations (UN) drafted the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS culminated in 1982, intending to open the high sea for all and reserve certain areas (200 nautical miles) under Exclusive Economic Zones. Hence, with the ordinance of UNCLOS, the United States feared violation of its interests and abuse of the rights of minor nations by certain powers, resulting in the formation of FONOP (Freund 2017).

FONOP stands for Freedom of Navigation Operation, a political and naval mission with an intention to disregard any claims on the maritime territory, extending to Exclusive Economic Zone (hereinafter referred to as EEZs) of various nations, by the United States of America. As defined by the US department of defence, FONOPS is a challenge to all exclusive maritime claims, to ensure freedom of navigation and enforcement of all international laws concerning oceans and seas. The drafting of UNCLOS, as mentioned above, triggered concern of excessive and unreasonable maritime claims by countries with strong national maritime interests. Therefore, FONOP was founded based on sovereign and equal laws with the motive of international cooperation and interdependence,

As the United States of America is not signatory to the UNCLOS and does not believe in the existence of EEZs, it tends to violate it by sailing through the areas permitted to the nations nearest by UNCLOS, and particularly the areas that the concerned states have closed for free navigation. The primary motive behind the formation of FONOP was to counter the increasing dominance of China and its muscle power flex in the South China Sea, although the policy is now being implemented around the globe (Freund 2017). America has repeatedly violated the EEZs of NATO members as well as its allies across the sphere. Also in recent events, America's naval fleet has conducted FONOP in the Indian EEZ, violating the latter rights assigned under UNCLOS. Such steps, taken against America's most important strategic ally in the region, i.e. India, prove that irrespective of geopolitical circumstances, America will adhere to its policies regarding the FONOP and security concerned with maritime perspective. Although, as mentioned above, the primary aim of the policy was to counter expansionism and Chinese

dominance in the South-China Sea, let us dwell deep into the effectiveness of the policy and the aftermaths of such ideological as well as a socio-political clash in the South-China sea.

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AS A POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

China, being the largest trading nation and largely dependent on the trade routes of the South China sea, possesses a keen interest in securing trade routes and intends to avoid any clash with regional powers, which might result in a power imbalance in the region. On the contrary, Beijing has several interests in the region as mentioned earlier. Hence, the Chinese 'Military Militia' has acted as an unattributed source of intimidation for all the vessels, whether commercial or military, operating in close proximity to China's claimed territory (Borges 2020). The formation of a nine-dash line by Beijing, encompassing numerous atolls and islands, with vast tracts of the sea which has already been avowed by other states results in serious consequences in terms of political upliftment. It further results in widespread and often violent public sentiments, backing certain ideologies, depending on the nation's interests. In such a situation, the interference of the United States with its military powers, such as FONOP, are welcomed by multiple nations and largely opposed by Beijing (Krejsa 2015). It results in intense situations which might work as a catalyst in turning the South China sea into a political battlefield between Beijing and Washington DC.

In such a situation, Freedom of Navigation Operation works as a checkpoint for the Chinese PLA's muscle power flex in the region. The direct aim of FONOP is to maintain free maritime space for all in the South China Sea, it is in the interest of US foreign policy as well as the regional nations to adhere to the policy and monitor the regional situation closely. By executing various naval exercises at different locations and times regularly under FONOP, it is a direct and efficient way to convey Washington's rejection of Beijing's excessive maritime claim and to uphold its commitment to uphold the rules-based order in the region. Other commitments by the US to its allies such as the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty, adds to the importance of FONOP in fulfilling such ambitions (Krejsa 2015). With the ties between south Asian countries and China strained due to the Nine-Dash line and another Chinese expansionist phenomenon, the Americans had keen diplomatic interests to safeguard its allies' interests in the region. One of the primary significance or the achievements of the FONOP is that it has effectively backed the claims of the regional nations and has acted as a spine for resistance to Beijing's dominance in the region ("U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress" 2021). Also, several naval interventions in the Chinese claimed regions have kept the latter's desires in check. Therefore, it can be said that it is of utmost necessity to counter the dominance to create a safe and secure maritime region for all. Hence, the need for FONOP is justified, yet it is not yet clear whether it has completely neutralized the Chinese dominance or is successful to some extent only.

FONOP: NECESSARY BUT INSUFFICIENT

In order to keep pace with current geopolitical development in the region, it is highly detrimental for Washington to conduct only FONOP to deter Beijing from pursuing its ambitious claims. FONOP is no doubt a necessary and costly asset of the US in keeping Chinese expansionism in check, but it also possesses a risk of conflict with Chinese fleets (Herscovitch 2017). Therefore, to persuade the Chinese Communist party to reconsider its unilateral expansionist propaganda, regional countries should come together and show constant resistance to such unilateral power. Also, FONOP in itself is insufficient and incapable of countering Chinese dominance single-handedly because the motive behind FONOP is not actually to challenge the territorial status quo in the region. Hence, FONOP cannot single-handedly stop China from repeating its activities such as the one at Spratly Islands and another standoff as witnessed at the Scarborough Shoal incident. Therefore, to counter Beijing's expansionism, the United States has to indulge in various kinds of diplomatic tactics and even have to use naval power if necessary. Diplomatic acts such as imposing bans or sanctions on Chinese companies and officials involved in acts violating the free maritime space for all, or even need to strengthen regional powers by financial aiding. Such acts might be costlier and might require a significant change in U.S policy towards the South China Sea disputes. Until this happens, FONOPs are necessary to let Beijing understand that Washington is firmly determined to resist its expansionist approach in the region.

FONOP DEADLOCK: NARROWING THE SCOPE OF EXPANSIONISM

Since 2017, it has been a pattern for the U.S to send its naval fleet in disputed South China sea territory once in two months, which is being countered by diplomatic warnings from Beijing. Although such acts have been now the 'new normal in the region, FONOP has indeed been efficient in limiting Chinese expansionism and narrowing down the scope to a relatively smaller extent. With no scope of Washington ending its operations under FONOP, it left Beijing with a deadlock in the South China Sea. It further limits the availability of options for Beijing to escape the deadlock. Therefore, let us have an overview of the realistic options available to China to approach the underlying situation in the region.

Firstly, the U.S FONOPs frequently occurring at times and locations unilaterally decided, it gives an upper hand of dominance to Washington, undermining the authority of Beijing on its 'claimed' maritime rights in the region. Such an act is responded by Chinese authorities by sending its Air Force to counter American presence and in some instances by firing warning shots, showing Chinese agitation due to the latter's presence (Xiaobo 2019). Therefore, the first option is to maintain the status quo in the region, with neither Beijing nor Washington winning the battle.

Secondly, FONOP has been successful in tackling Chinese ambitions constantly. Such an act can frustrate the stakeholder of expansionism. Adding to it is the American policy of unforgiveness to maritime harassment, especially when it comes to FONOP which is backed by its military strength (Xiaobo 2019). The global and long-standing practice of FONOP by the US navy,

showcasing it to be the flagbearer for free and safe oceans, further narrows the scope of FONOP being deterred from operating in the South China sea. Hence, in such circumstances there arises a possibility of Beijing responding harshly with collisions or minor conflicts being possible outcomes.

Thirdly, United States' FONOP in the South China sea has aimed to target China's unreasonable and excessive maritime claims which include excessive straight baselines such as the 'nine-dash line, encompassing claimed territories of other nations, attempt to establish a monopoly in the region by making it necessary to require the prior consent of Beijing to send naval warships in the region, artificial island makings, absolute jurisprudence over EEZs and many more. FONOP has had success in keeping such Chinese ambitions in check and therefore has resulted in a deadlock in the region (Xiaobo 2019). Therefore, it leaves Beijing with an option to negotiate and seek cooperation in the region. Although considering the Chinese seriousness towards Expansionism, the practicality of such an option is minimal.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis and evidence confirm that the Chinese Communist Party has been successful in deeply emphasizing the expansionist propaganda in the region under the name of national unity. As alarmed by such foreign policy, it was inevitable for Americans to strike to defend their own and their allies' interests in the region. Therefore, to send a clear message of intolerance of such draconian policies, the US formulated the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP). FONOP, to counter and forfeit Chinese claims in the region, violates the dominance of the latter by marching through the exclusively claimed territory of Beijing. Such policy has no doubt been successful in infringing a challenge to the Chinese dominance in the region. Although, such an effort is 'too little and too late'. With such an increased military as well as an economic power, policies like FONOP become insufficient to counter China in the South China Sea. Hence, with the increasing strength of China as well as other regional powers, it becomes difficult to foresee a victorious side in near future. Hence, the only affordable option left is to create stability in the region. Therefore, it can be said that policies like FONOP, if continued sincerely, possess the capability to provide a platform for both sides to achieve a ceasefire in the cold battle of dominance in the region.

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