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Assessing Europe's perspectives on the South China Sea

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Outline of presentation

- Evolution of Europe's thinking on maritime disputes in the South China Sea
- Europe's strategic interests in the region
- Worsening security situation
- Europe's response, including examination of EU member states' naval diplomacy in and around the South China Sea

Evolution of Europe's position on the South China Sea

- From neglect to concern
- Transatlantic alignment
- The Hague Tribunal arbitration
- Current thinking

Europe's strategic interests in the region

- Economic interests: China is the EU's 2nd largest trading partner. In 2018, two-way trade amounted to € 580 billion. As of 2019, China and the EU trade more than 1.5 billion euros in goods each day
- ASEAN as a whole represents the EU's 3rd largest trading partner outside Europe (after the US and China) with more than € 240 billion of trade in goods in 2018, while trade in services amounted to almost € 80 billion
- The EU is for China the largest and for ASEAN the second largest trading partner as well as the main source of investments
- Strategic interests: Peace, regional stability, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea are of crucial importance for the EU and its member states.

Europe's soft power in Asia

- The EU is mainly a soft power in Asia, unable to play power politics due to its distinctive institutional characteristics and lack of serious hard power
- The EU contributes to security in the region by supporting multilateral security frameworks and dialogues: Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF – track one); Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP – track two)
- EU and ASEAN High Level Dialogue on Maritime Security
- The EU has deployed its soft power capabilities in the region several times in the past years: (i) Crisis management and civilian missions in Cambodia, East Timor, Aceh, Afghanistan; (ii) Humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, Timor, North Korea and Indonesia; (iii) Peace-building in Mindanao; (iv) Capacity-building in Myanmar.

Europe's growing security involvement

- December 2018: The EU launched a pilot project to support tailor-made security cooperation with an initial set of five countries: India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea and Vietnam, with particular focus in four areas: maritime, counter-terrorism, crisis management (peacekeeping/CSDP) and cybersecurity
- The pilot project builds on – and aims to expand - security cooperation initiatives already established between the EU and these five countries
- EU-ASEAN High Level Dialogue on Maritime Security established some years ago. Their cooperation now includes exchanges on piracy lessons, maritime surveillance, port security, disaster relief and capacity building. The EU is also training members of the ASEAN Regional Forum on preventive diplomacy and mediation
- China does not feature in the pilot project.

The military dimension

- Europe does not have binding military alliances in Asia
- UK still a member of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) – military consultation with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore
- France has operational presence, with thousand of troops deployed in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific
- EU cooperates on space technology and satellite navigation with China, South Korea, India and Japan (with the latter mainly at industrial level)
- EU member states' naval diplomacy accompanied by growing arms sales in the region.

European arms sales in the region

- EU countries continue to sell military equipment in the region
- Competition exists among European defence companies, of course, but even more so between EU and US defence manufacturers for acquiring shares of Asia's buoyant procurement budgets
- Europeans have developed a strong market presence in South and South-East Asia, especially in sales of naval units (submarines, frigates, corvettes) and jet fighters
- According to SIPRI, Asia imports around 20% of its armaments from Europe and 30% from the US. But in Southeast Asia, Europe and the US are almost on a par.

Worsening security situation in the South China Sea

- Since 2010, China's growing assertiveness towards its smaller and weaker neighbours in South East Asia
- Chinese territorial and maritime claims over large swaths of the South China Sea (a 'core issue' for Beijing) are based on economic and security considerations, as well as on national identity making and the renewal of China's past *grandeur* (President Xi Jinping's vision of the 'China dream')
- China continues to challenge the rules-based order in the area through building several artificial islands with their military facilities and weapons systems, drilling for oil and gas, and chasing off its Southeast Asian neighbours' fishing vessels from waters where they have the rights to fish in pursuant to UNCLOS and the Hague Tribunal ruling.

Europe's response to the arbitration

- Following the ruling by The Hague Tribunal, Federica Mogherini, the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, issued a mild declaration stressing the need for the parties to resolve the dispute in accordance with international law - but without mentioning China
- Beijing had tried to block the statement by putting pressure on some EU member states that had received significant Chinese investments
- In the end, the declaration's final version was watered down by Greece, Hungary and Croatia
- The EU has, however, made itself available to facilitate ASEAN-China dialogue on devising a code of conduct for the South China Sea.

EU member states

- At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2016, then France's Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared that Paris would encourage the EU to undertake 'regular and visible' patrols in the area
- In June 2018, a French maritime task group, together with UK helicopters and ships, joined the US and other countries, sailing naval vessels through international waters in the South China Sea
- On board of one of the French vessels there were officials from other EU member states (Germany, Italy, Denmark) as well as a representative of the EEAS – Europe's diplomatic service (more precisely, the COASI – the EU member states' Working Group on Asia).



Europe's naval operations in the South China Sea (i)

- The 2017 French operation in support of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea encompassed five French navy vessels, including a transit in the Taiwan Strait, and was combined with a port call in Shanghai in China to demonstrate that the actions were not directed against China
- The 2018 operation, which encompassed three British and two French naval vessels, omitted a port call in China
- The decision not to visit China reflects growing European dissatisfaction with continued Chinese militarization in the South China Sea and with China's plans to negotiate a code of conduct for the area without including third countries such as the EU.

Europe's naval operations in the South China Sea (ii)

- In 2019, Europe's naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific has centered on the Indian Ocean
- The capabilities that formed part of the operations were much larger than before: France deployed the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle with a rotating cast of allied ships from the UK, Portugal, Denmark, Italy, Australia and the US
- The carrier group sailed from the eastern Mediterranean off the Middle East via the Suez Canal to Bab-el-Mandep, the Horn of Africa and Yemen, then across the Indian Ocean and via the Malacca Strait to Singapore. During the deployment, the carrier group participated in maritime exercises with the Egyptian, Indian and Japanese navies.

Europe's naval operations in the South China Sea (iii)

- The 2019 European tour included the passage of a French warship, the frigate Vendemiaire, through the Taiwan Strait
- As a consequence of the French transit, France was disinited to a naval parade in Qingdao marking the 70 years since the founding of China's navy
- The operation reflects a general hardening of positions in Europe vis-à-vis Chinese encroachments on the rules of the post-world war II liberal international order
- The Europeans have, however, refrained from sailing within twelve nautical miles from disputed features in the area is stark contrast with the US navy which routinely conducts non-innocent passage within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features.

Conclusion

- China's militarisation of the South China Sea has been a wake up call for the EU and its member states, leading the EU to scale up its security involvement in the region, including sailing naval vessels in the Sea's international waters
- There is growing willingness within the EU and among member states not only to issue diplomatic protests but also to take action to defend the rules-based order in the region.

Thank you ! - Cảm ơn bạn!