

Study On The Situation Between France And The South China Sea From The Perspective Of Balance Of Power Theory

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of China and the escalation of tension between China and the United States, European countries led by Britain, France and Germany pay increasing attention to the regional situation in the Asia-Pacific (now known as "Indo-Pacific"). Among them, the South China Sea (SCS) is one of the main areas disputed by China, the United States, Southeast Asian countries and some European countries. Western countries are worried that the rise of China's military power will break the stability of the situation in SCS and alter the balance of power among major powers. Therefore, they tried to balance China's rise through alliance. In France's Indo-Pacific strategy, France aims to build a regional order with the alliance of France, India and Australia as the core, and regularly carry out military exercises targeting SCS with the United States, Japan and Southeast Asian countries. This paper aims to study the activities and motivation of France in the South China Sea, and put the situation in SCS under the perspective of Balance of Power Theory, focusing on China, America and France. It will be argued that great powers are carefully maintaining the balance of military power in SCS, and it is highly possible that this trend would still last in the middle and long term, particularly via military deployment and strategic alliances.

KEYWORDS: South China Sea, France, China, Balance of Power theory, Indo-Pacific.

1 INTRODUCTION

“Balance of power” is one of the most important theories in realism school, and has been discussed by scholars for centuries. By observing the war between Athens and Sparta, Thucydides came to the conclusion that building an effective power balance could both result in the outbreak of war or the prevention of war[1]. According to Morgenthau[2], “balance of power” refers to a relatively stable distribution of power between state actors on the international stage. Integrating the views of various scholars, “balance of power” can be defined as a temporary steady state between countries through alliance and confrontation, which aims to prevent the emergence of any superpower. “Balance of power” have some core assumptions: the international system is anarchy, thus states continuously struggle for power with each other to guarantee their own survival, “balance of power” is not a goal of states but rather is a final product of power competition; the main component of state power is military power; state always seeks to strengthen themselves, thus they tend to alliance with other states to resist rising states together that pose a threat to existing hegemony.

“Balance of power” theory can be applied to analyze the current South China Sea situation. According to Kaplan’s model[3], a balance of power system is supposed to have at least five major powers to maintain enough flexibility and complexity. SCS fulfils this criteria for providing an arena between America, China, Southeast Asian countries and some European countries. For western countries, China’s rise is a threat to American hegemony and existing power balance. Thus, the US, UK, France, Germany strengthened their military alliance with Southeast Asian countries (particularly the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei), Japan, India and Australia. The security of SCS is crucial to the global situation, since the world's major powers are involved. Any country's expansionary behaviour may lead to the outbreak of war. Therefore, it is very important to maintain the balance of power in SCS, at least not to let a single country destroy the balance in a short time.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 New trends of France in the South China Sea in recent years

In order to cope with the trend of "rising in the East and falling in the west" of global strength and China's challenge to the Asia Pacific order, France proposed "pivot to Asia" in 2012[4]. With the establishment of the "strategic partnership" between France and Vietnam in 2013 and the signing of the defense cooperation agreement between France and the Philippines in 2016, France has changed from its previous neutral attitude to officially uniting Southeast Asian countries to oppose China's proposition in the South China Sea[5].

France's actions in the South China Sea mainly include joint cruises, sale of military weapons, participation in military exercises and strategic alliances. In 2013, Southeast Asia received a total of 2682 billion euros of European weapons. Among them, Vietnam ordered French Exocet anti-ship missiles, while the Philippines imported French armed light helicopters[6]. In 2015, the French naval task force sailed through Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands. France said they had fully exercised the freedom of navigation permitted by international law[7]. In May 2017, France conducted its first joint military exercise with the navies of the United States, Britain and Japan to restrict China's freedom of navigation in SCS[8]. In 2019, during the Shangri La Dialogue, the French defense minister mentioned that France has been trying to build a military alliance with India and Australia. At the same time, Malaysia is an important partner of France in Southeast Asia, and France will actively

cooperate more closely with ADMM plus. In September 2020, Britain, France and Germany submitted a diplomatic letter to the United Nations, emphasizing that China's "historic rights" of the South China Sea are inconsistent with international law and the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In February 2021, France sent a nuclear attack submarine and naval support ship across the SCS and planned another transit with an amphibious attack ship and frigate as part of its annual Jeanne D'arc mission.

As can be seen from the above activities, France's activities in the South China Sea are becoming increasingly frequent, from the initial alliance and arms assistance to the subsequent direct intervention of military forces, which presents a situation of pressing China's military in SCS step by step. The following will analyze the main reasons for the increased frequency of France's involvement in the South China Sea.

2.2 Analysis on the motivation of the increasing trend of France's involvement in the South China Sea

A. Historical reasons

One of the reasons why France has spent substantial arms in the South China Sea is that France has lost its past islands in SCS. Therefore, France wants to maintain a certain sense of existence in SCS even if it is nearly impossible to recapture them.

On April 13, 1930, the French gunboat "Malicieuse" occupied the Spratly Islands (de La Tempete) and nearby reef islands[9]. On July 25, 1933, France formally announced the annexation of Spratly Islands, which is the starting point for France to advocate sovereignty over Spratly Islands. From 1933 to 1939, France occupied nine Spratly Islands. In July 1938, the French occupied Paracel Islands in the course of China's comprehensive resistance against Japan[10]. After the victory of anti-Japanese war, according to the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, in 1946 November to December, China took back the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands occupied by Japanese militarism and resumed their exercise of sovereignty.

Vietnam now believes that when France left Indochina in 1945, it had abandoned the sovereignty of two islands, and as a former colony of France, Vietnam had the right to inherit the islands after independence. However, France does not admit that it has lost all the SCS islands, which may be one of the reasons why France is still involved in the SCS nowadays. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in September 1953 that ships in Spratly Islands belonged to France, rather than Vietnam. In addition, in 1938, the Paracel Islands occupied by France was under the jurisdiction of Thua Thien Province of Vietnam. However, France did not draw any official maps showing that Spratly Islands belonged to the French ruled Vietnam. Therefore, according to international law, the sovereignty of Spratly Islands had not been transferred from France to Vietnam. Apart from that, France holds on the view that China occupied the islands controlled by Vietnam by force in 1974, which violated international law. Therefore, France also believes that China has problems in the legitimacy of occupying SCS Islands, which has become a reason for France to confront China in SCS in the 21st century.

B. International situation

As a traditional western ally of the United States, France's political policy towards Asian affairs basically follows American steps, although its position is usually not as tough as that of the US. In 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first proposed "rebalancing Asia-

Pacific", and in 2012, France also proposed "pivot to Asia"; In 2017, the Trump administration put forward the "Indo-Pacific strategy", showing the ambition of the United States to expand its alliance. Then, in 2019, France also introduced its own "Indo-Pacific strategy", which not only follows the eastward movement of the U.S. strategy, but also aims to protect its own economic interests and overseas regions. On the one hand, France could guarantee its security by jointly resisting the rising China with the United States. On the other hand, intervening in SCS affairs also plays a role in demonstrating the power of great power and declaring France's core dominant position in the EU.

In the final analysis, there are three considerations why France chose to adapt to the global situation: from the perspective of realistic politics, France strives not to be excluded in the wave of global power turning to Asia, and then integrates India and the Pacific into its global strategy; From the perspective of economic development, France should seek to master the leading power and voice in the formulation and game of new global trade rules, and lead the construction and development of economic order; From the normative level, France urges emerging countries represented by China to abide by the so-called "international norms" by strengthening dialogue and diplomacy with "democratic countries".

C. Strategic considerations

According to <France and security in the Indo-Pacific> issued by the French Ministry of defense in 2019 [11], France attaches importance to the Indo Pacific region for the main purposes of safeguarding economic interests, deploying military forces and protecting overseas regions. The Indo Pacific region has France's exclusive economic zone of nearly 9 million square kilometers. In 2018, France's exports to the India Pacific region accounted for 34% of France's exports outside the EU. In the South China Sea, militarization has exacerbated tensions. Considering that one-third of world trade is transferred through this strategic region, France believes that maintaining security and stability in the South China Sea is crucial to protect its trade from being affected. Therefore, at the Shangri La summit, the French defense minister repeatedly stressed the need to maintain the "rules-based international order" and "freedom of navigation", and stressed the need to safeguard the international maritime law in the South China Sea.

France has five overseas regions (ROM), namely Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, French Guiana in South America, Mayotte and Reunion in the Indian Ocean[12]. In addition, France has several overseas entities. These islands and overseas territories also provide a large number of military bases. Almost all overseas provinces and entities have military bases of varying sizes to house military personnel and equipment. The Indian Ocean islands of Reunion and Mayotte have two frigates (equipped with integral helicopters), a multi-mission ship, two patrol ships (including a polar patrol ship) and two tactical transport aircraft. The Pacific islands of French Polynesia and New Caledonia have three frigates (equipped with integrated helicopters), two multi mission ships, three patrol ships, five maritime reconnaissance aircraft, four tactical transport aircraft and five helicopters[13]. It is worth noting that these military equipments can be dispatched by France to areas requiring military exercises or navigation missions. For example, Vendemiaire, which used to dock in New Caledonia, was sent to the Philippines in 2018 to carry out defense cooperation in the South China Sea; In 2019, it voyaged to the Taiwan Strait for FONOP (freedom of navigation operation) activities.

Therefore, France has shifted its national strategy from the "Asia Pacific region" to the "Indo Pacific region", the main purposes pointing to SCS are: 1. Follow the shift of the strategic

focus of the United States, to obtain security guarantee from the United States by actively helping to balance China's military forces in SCS; 2. Increase allies, especially India, Australia, and New Zealand, strengthen military cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and thus strengthen naval forces in SCS through military exercises, weapon assistance and other means; 3. Reaffirms the importance that France attaches to its overseas territories in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in order to mobilize naval equipment to SCS when necessary.

2.3 Analysis on the situation in the South China Sea between France, The United States and China from the perspective of “Balance of Power Theory”

At present, the western countries led by the United States are aware of the rise of China's naval power in the South China Sea, and China's stance has become increasingly tough. Therefore, the United States has formed alliance with European countries and Southeast Asian countries to strengthen military deployment in SCS to balance China's power. While cooperating with the United States, France is also looking for allies in the Indian Pacific region to ensure its own security, safeguarding interests and highlighting the strength of major power.

As the largest country in the South China Sea, China has the largest Navy and weapons. According to the US Department of defense, China has the largest Navy in the Indo-Pacific region, with at least 300 ships, as well as many submarines, amphibious ships, patrol boats and special ships, and dozens of attack submarines. In 2019, China's Marine Corps program expanded from 10000 to 30000 soldiers. China Coast Guard (CCG) is another powerful force, the largest coast guard in the South China Sea and the world. Beijing has made sufficient military preparations for the disputed islands. In 2016, Beijing deployed HQ-9 missile defense company on Woody island and landed J-10 and J-11 fighters there for several times; In April 2018, Liaoning aircraft carrier participated in SCS live fire drill as part of at least 40 surface ships; In 2019, an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) test was conducted near the disputed Spratly Islands[14].

In contrast, the continental United States is far away from SCS, and its military projection power is relatively inferior. However, the United States is increasing the frequency of military activities in the South China Sea in recent years. U.S. military activities in SCS can be divided into six categories: declarative action, existential action, military reconnaissance and intelligence collection activities, training and exercises, battlefield construction, operational concept verification and deterrence action[15]. In the past 12 years, the exposure frequency of "freedom of navigation" and "crossing the Taiwan Strait" done by the United States is increasing year by year; In 2018, the US has more than 30 sorties of B-52 bombers cruising the South China Sea; In 2019, the US Navy has three aircraft carriers to the South China Sea; On average, the US military has 3 warships and 2-4 reconnaissance aircraft operating in SCS area[16].

In order to strengthen military power to balance China, in 2017, the United States restarted the "US-Japan-India-Australia quadruple security dialogue" (the Quad), raised joint boycotting China's influence in SCS to the strategic level, and regularly held foreign minister talks and military exercises.

France has also played a role in implementing a hard balance with China. First of all, France has continuously expanded its military strength in SCS after its focus has shifted to Asia.

Since 2014, French military deployment in Asia has expanded eastward to the South China Sea; In 2017, France arranged at least 5 ships sailing through Spratly Islands. In 2017 and 2018, France used its annual Jeanne d'Arc naval exercise to cross SCS for defending "freedom of navigation".

Secondly, France has formed extensive alliances with the United States, Britain and Indo Pacific countries to form a military camp to balance China. In 2014 and 2016, French frigate Vendémiaire conducted joint exercises with American frigates; In 2017, the United States, Japan, France and Britain held the first quadripartite military exercise, including amphibious landing and helicopter delivery. France successively determined the "strategic partnership" with Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam in 2011, 2012 and 2013, held anti-submarine exercises with Malaysia in the South China Sea in 2016, and signed a formal defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines in the same year[17]. Since 2014, France and Japan have held two plus two meetings of foreign and defense ministers every year and signed the 2018 acquisition and cross service agreement (ACSA) to support interoperability and mutual support services between the two armies. In 2020, France, India and Australia held their first tripartite dialogue. This alliance could not only launch trilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean (or even cooperate with Vietnam and other countries in SCS), but also speed up their contacts in the fields of national defense manufacturing, national defense technology and intelligence sharing. This mechanism may cooperate with the ASEAN Regional Forum in the future, including the extension of Indo-Pacific powers such as South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand[18].

From the perspective of subjective intention, China's military action aims to claim sovereignty over the disputed SCS islands and defend China's sea domination; The US action aims to defend the so-called "freedom of navigation" and suppress China's intention to expand power in SCS through military deployment; France's action aims to help the United States declare freedom of navigation, support Southeast Asian countries compete against China's sovereignty in SCS, and unite India and Australia to enhance their power projection. In terms of their existing characteristics, China has the strongest military strength in the South China Sea, with a large number of permanent troops and offensive weapons; SCS is not the main battlefield of the United States, but the US maintains high frequency existential actions and ensures a certain combat capability in SCS; For France, its military focus is still in Europe, so France has only sent a small amount of military equipment to SCS, but France has shown a trend of increasingly extensive alliance, from certain Southeast Asian countries to major countries with common interests in the Indo Pacific region, and there is a trend to treat China's existence in SCS from a soft balance dominated by diplomacy to a hard balance dominated by military.

3 METHODOLOGY

This article is a combination of empirical method and interpretation method. As for empirical method, official documents from French ministry of defense (for example, France's Indo-Pacific strategy) are frequently used to analyze France's military presence in South China Sea; in terms of interpretation method, the situation in the South China Sea (particularly the military presence of China, America and France) has been explained from the perspective of Balance of Power Theory.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper applies the balance of power theory of realism school to the situation in the South China Sea, and analyzes the current situation and motivation of France's involvement in SCS. From France's military deployment in SCS, the complexity of participating countries and the importance of maintaining the balance of disputing powers can be seen. This paper first introduces the balance of power theory, then reviews the military actions of France in SCS in recent years, analyzes its motivation, and finally interprets the power distribution in SCS from the perspective of balance of power theory (focusing on China, the United States and France).

In the medium and long term, it is highly possible that the major disputing countries will continue to carefully maintain the balance of power in SCS, neither making their opponents strong nor seizing islands and reefs by force, so as to avoid the outbreak of large-scale military conflict. However, the momentum of China's rise can not be resisted by western countries. As the world's second largest economy, China has extensive trade relations with all countries in the Western camp. For the purpose of maintaining economic interests, European countries will not risk to completely standing on the opposite side of China. In the future, China's voice in SCS will probably be further enhanced. The author believes that, disputed islands in SCS are more likely to be resolved through diplomatic methods rather than military means.

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