

## *Interview*

# *Gergely Salát, PhD*

---

**Yen Duong**

**Introduction:** Dr. Salát is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Chinese Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary. He is also an Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, Hungary.

*During the past few years, international media have paid more attention towards the maritime dispute on the South China Sea. The dispute certainly raises concerns towards the growing tensions between the countries involved, and more importantly, China's emerging role in the region. As an expert on China's policy, can you share your points of view on China's maritime interests in the South China Sea and how does this affect China's diplomatic relations with other countries?*

I think this whole issue should be understood in the context of China-US relations. The Obama administration has this “pivot to the East” Policy which also aims at China. What we see in the South China Sea is some kind of a competition for influence between China and the US. Of course, the countries that are involved like Vietnam, the Philippines or Indonesia consider the islands very important, but the real issue is great power politics. Who controls the South China Sea and the Spratly and Paracel Islands? For the Chinese side, it is quite clear that China is trying to get back the influence it used to have for thousands of years. Southeast Asia was part of the Chinese cultural sphere, but in the 19th and 20th century, it lost its influence. Now it is trying to restore the historical order and get back as much influence as it can. On the other side, the US is trying to retain its influence in the region. In the second half of the 20th century, the US became very important to Southeast Asia, it had good connections with the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, or Malaysia, and got deeply involved in the wars

and other events of the region. What we see now in Southeast Asia is the competition for influence between China and the US. I think this South China Sea dispute is just a part of this competition.

*We will come back to the Sino-US relations later. How does this dispute actually affect the security, economics and trade within the region?*

It is a very difficult question. If you look at the economic data and trade statistics, relations are flourishing inside the Southeast Asian region, and also between the region and China. I think China has never been so close to Southeast Asia in economic terms as it is now. China and Southeast Asia have very good business relations, and this is true even for China and Vietnam. They are not very good friends, but the trade between China and Vietnam has never been as extensive as in these days. Now we see a contradiction between economic ties and the political and military relations. I think if you are in Southeast Asia, or actually anywhere in the world, you cannot resist the temptation to build good economic relationship with China. It is a great import market and a great source of goods and capital. You cannot isolate yourself from China, especially in Southeast Asia. So what I see is that it is natural that the countries in Southeast Asia are getting closer and closer to China, in economics, trade, investment, etc. On the other hand, they try to counterbalance this economic dependence in the political sphere by building better relationships with the US and the EU. The whole region is depending on China economically, but they do not want to depend on China in terms of military or politics.

*The dispute involves many countries within the ASEAN (Associations of Southeast Asian Nations). Does the economic influence will somehow affect the politics in the region?*

I think that ASEAN is very divided on this question. There are just too many members, and they have different interests in China. For example, Cambodia is very pro-China in the region, and it will never vote for any resolution that condemns China or which is against China's interests. The same is true for Laos or even Singapore. Other countries, like Vietnam or the Philippines, also members of ASEAN, do have conflicts with China. ASEAN is a rather loose organisation, unlike the EU. I do not think that ASEAN as a community will ever do anything that is against China. Member countries might do something one by one, but ASEAN as a community will not.

*Does China also have different foreign policies for individual countries in ASEAN?*

China tends to use the “divide and rule” strategy in its foreign relations. It is a strategy that has been used for thousands of years, and China applies it in the case of ASEAN as well. It is holding negotiations with ASEAN, but at the same time, it deals with the countries individually. Actually, China does the same thing with the EU; it has an embassy and a large number of diplomats in Brussels, and Beijing seems to have really intensive relationships with the EU, but for China, what is really important is China-France relations, China-Germany relations, China-Britain relations, etc. It is much better for China to deal with the countries one by one.

*So we come back to this sea dispute. How far do you think the dispute will escalate, considering many countries such as Vietnam or the Philippines are trying to militarise it by upgrading their defence forces?*

Recently, it seems that the dispute escalates quite quickly. You can see this island building efforts on the Chinese side, but you can also see the militarisation in the Philippines and Vietnam. But I think that these countries are so interdependent economically that none of them will risk a real war. The only case in which a war might happen is if the US decides that it will get into an open conflict with China. In that case there is a possibility that the US will lure or force those countries into war that defy Chinese forces in the region, especially in the South China Sea.

*And what are Beijing’s opinions when the US expressed that it might intervene to safeguard the security of its allies in the region?*

China says that this is meddling in its interior affairs. Chinese have always said that the South China Sea dispute is not an international problem, the islands and the seas around them belong to China, and everybody who talks about them talks about China’s interior affairs. So by simply mentioning something as a “South China Sea dispute”, one already questions the sovereignty of China. Chinese opinion is very clear, they say that “this is ours, we will not talk about it, and we will not talk about where those seas belong; the question of sovereignty is something we will not discuss”. And if the US wants to interfere in the affair, China will

not back off, I think it will even risk war. Not because China wants war, but because of the public opinion, which is about 100% on the side of the Chinese government. They say that this is a Chinese sea, these are Chinese islands. And you will never see that the Chinese government goes against these popular sentiments, because if they say that “let us discuss those islands”, the public will say that that government is a traitor, it is selling the country and so on. They are quite nationalistic, and Chinese public will push the leaders of China into a conflict if the US provokes it.

*Do you think that this dispute has changed the diplomatic relations between the US and China?*

I do not think that Beijing wants to have an open conflict with the US. It is not China's interest to be engaged in a war; China's interest is to have a peaceful environment that makes the development of trade and business possible. China is very dependent of trade. Much of the energy and raw materials that China uses come from abroad, and China's whole economy is built on export, so it cannot really afford to risk the functioning of these markets, because then the economy will collapse, and the whole system will break down. So what is in China's interest is peace. On the other hand, there are certain issues in which China cannot step back. These are the questions of sovereignty over Tibet, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and other disputed territories like the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island. Sovereignty over these territories is a red line that nobody can cross. The conflict is not in the interest of China, but in case somebody crosses the red line, then China will undertake any conflict.

*At the same time China is having territorial disputes with not just Southeast Asia, but also with Taiwan, South Korea, India, and Japan. What are China's regional objectives and what are the motives behind these territorial claims?*

I do not think that there was ever a time in the history of mankind that men did not want to have as much territory and resources as possible. That is how states work, that is how the human nature, especially the nature of the politicians, work. They want to control as much territory, as much resources as possible. It has always been the same with the Chinese as well. What I see is that the modern national identity of China, or of the whole Chinese nation, was born between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, when China

saw itself as a victim of Western powers, of Japan, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a victim of the Soviet Union. So they all feel that they have been a victim for most of the past 150 years. In that regard, I think China's national identity is not very healthy, it is not normal that much of your identity is built on your past sufferings. For this reason, for this sense of victimhood, Chinese politicians just cannot say that "OK, we let that territory go". It is just impossible because the whole national identity is based on the desire of getting back the past prominence and sovereignty of China, getting back all the territories, restoring all the influence, etc. That is what Chinese politics in the 21st century are about: getting back the greatness that China used to have.

*So you think that this concept of national identity actually has direct influence on China's foreign policy?*

I think so. If you hear what Chinese politicians say about the question of sovereignty over certain territories, and the country's territorial integrity, you can see that this whole Chinese nationalism in the 20th and even the 21th century is not really healthy. Actually I think one of the objectives of China is to grow, to develop, to become so powerful, so rich that nobody can question its sovereignty over Tibet, Taiwan, or the South China Sea islands, etc. The country has developed for the past 30 years enormously, and it can develop more. Now they do not want to solve this problem very quickly, they say that they have time, and if they cannot do it now, they can do it in 10 years, 20 years, 30 years or whenever. Maybe in 30 years, they can make the US, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, Japan and everyone accept the legitimacy of their claims, while maintaining good relations with them. China will be so great in terms of strength, money, technology, etc. that nobody will dare to go against it.

*This whole territorial dispute also influences Chinese reputation on the global scale. Considering China is now an emerging political power, do you think it will have an impact on how other countries perceive China?*

That is a very huge dilemma for China. It has invested billions of dollars in its soft power efforts and charm offensive in order to become attractive. On the other hand, it is also building its hard power. But if you are threatening your neighbours, they will not like you. That is one of the huge contradictions of contemporary Chinese politics. I do not think they

have a good answer for solving this contradiction. What they try to do is telling their side of the story everywhere in the world. Again in Vietnam, China is not very popular, but that is Vietnam. I do not think that anybody in Africa, or South America, really care about the South China Sea. They care about Chinese money, Chinese investment, Chinese market, so you can see that China is more popular in other parts of the world. Also in Southeast Asia, China is not really liked in Vietnam, but in Cambodia and some other countries it is held in a great esteem. However, the growing assertiveness of China in the Asia-Pacific region do have a negative effect on how China is perceived in countries that have a power conflict with China. This is especially true for the US and, indirectly, Europe. The reputation of China in the Western world is not very good, and its activities on the South China Sea will not help.

*Do you think that the European Union will have anything to do with the conflict on the sea, considering it is the second biggest trading route, so the security in the region is certainly critical to the EU's economic stakes in the region?*

What concerns the EU is the security of the routes, not the sovereignty. The EU does not really care who those islands belong to. On the other side, China do want to have control of those shipping lines. The EU is the largest trading and investment partner of China, it is much bigger than the US or Japan, and most of the trade between the EU and China go through those shipping lines. It is quite clear that China wants to keep the goods flowing. China does not want to stop trade, China wants to control it, and Europe knows that, so it does not sincerely care. On the other hand, what can the EU do with the Spratly or Paracel islands, if it cannot even solve the problem of Greece, or the issues concerning illegal immigration? EU is a good economic community, but in terms of world politics or military, it does not have real power.

*So the relationship between China and the EU is more in terms of economy?*

Yes. The EU is good in soft power, economy, and technology, but it does not have an army, so if the conflict in South China Sea breaks out, what can it do? It does not really have any political influence. It is possible, however, that the US will apply pressure on the EU, and as a result the EU can, in a way, turn against China. If the US becomes an enemy to China, its interest will be to get the EU on its own side. You can see it in the case of Russia. The EU and

Russia had quite a good relationship until recently. It was not really in the interest of the EU to let the Ukrainian crisis break out and escalate. It served the interests of the US. EU countries like Germany and France had really good trade relationships with Russia, they did not want sanctions, they did not want the relationship to be pressured, but it is quite clear that the US is forcing them in some way to maintain the sanctions against Russia, and to keep the conflict with Russia alive. And the US have the means to influence other countries. The same thing might happen in the case of China. Now you see how the Western press is heavily influenced by the American press and American politics; so maybe in a few years the next target will be China, so most people in Europe will consider China an enemy. And elected politicians will follow public opinion. But this will be under the influence or pressure of Washington, it does not come from inside the EU, because we do not really have any great problems or direct conflict of interests with China.

*It is also interesting to observe that during the past year, the Sino-Russian relations have really improved. Do you think that these US-EU sanctions against Russia actually have anything to do with this Sino-Russian relationship, and do you think that Russia will be more involved in the Asia-Pacific region?*

Of course, the developments of Western-Russian and Chinese-Russian relations are closely connected. If your border to the West is closed, like in the case of Russia, then you have to turn to the East for investment, trade, credit, resources and support. So actually the US and the EU managed to make Russia fall in the arms of China, even though Russia and China have had quite a lot of conflicts. But they just put them aside, and as they are the common enemies of the West, or at least of the US, they just work together. You can see that in the past year they had this natural gas deal, and a series of energy trade and investment deals signed. Actually Russia's economy was practically saved by China last year. This is quite a big mistake from the side of the West: you should not have made two powerful countries become good friends and stick together against you. On the other hand, China gives help to Russia, but the Chinese never give anything for free. It is quite clear that they expect Russia to support them in the Asia-Pacific conflicts and in the disputes with Japan. In this regard, the US managed to get a very powerful ally for China.

*So do you think that China and Russia will establish alliance in order to go against the suppression from the US?*

China does not go into any form of formal alliances. It is one of the basic Chinese foreign policy principles that China does not take part in any kind of military or political alliance that might influence its sovereignty. China actually does not have any formal alliance with anyone. It has good relations with Pakistan and North Korea, but they are not formal allies, they did not sign any such treaties. The same principle will be applied in the case of Russia: they will not have any formal military alliance, they will only have this kind of loose cooperation like that in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and they will surely support each other in different issues. They can make the kind of deal that, for example, if Russia supports China in the South China Sea dispute, then China will support Russia in return by providing credit and investment amid Western sanctions, buying Russian goods, backing Russian efforts in Syria or whatever. But they will not get into a formal alliance. And I do not think they actually need that, it is enough for them to cooperate very well, without any form of alliance, to counter Western influence and pressure.

*Will this cooperation also be about military?*

They have quite good relationships between the two armies. China has been the biggest importer of Russian arms for decades, and the two countries have recently held a number of joint military drills. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is not a very new thing, also has a remarkable military aspect. So Russia and China have good military relations, but I do not think they will enter into a formal alliance, they do not need that. They may do that, however, if there is an open conflict between the US and China, and the US and Russia.

*When we talk about these disputes, none of the countries involved actually want any conflict that might be negative towards the economy. So do you think there are any possible solutions for this dispute?*

The most probable outcome is that China will get so strong in a few decades, that other countries will eventually let the islands go, and forget about their territorial claims. It is not a solution, however, it is just an outcome. The other possibility is some kind of open clash, for



instance, a conflict between the US and China, but maybe the US will not be a part of it directly. It might provide military technology and weapons for its allies to fight China.

Finally, there can also be some kind of a status quo that is maintained for an infinite time. China may not go into a war that can do so much harm to China itself, so it will not take the risk, and other countries will hopefully refrain from provoking Beijing. Something similar has happened in the case of Taiwan. China has been saying that Taiwan belongs to it since 1949, but has never dared to attack it or tried to actually expand its sovereignty over the island. Maybe this will happen to the South China Sea, too. It is possible that it will belong to everybody but also to nobody for maybe a hundred years. However, I think that if China has domestic problems, then Chinese leaders will be much less flexible because they tend to be rather aggressive outside if they have problems within their borders. So if China has an economic breakdown or a political crisis or something similar at home, then Beijing may one day claim that from now on nobody can enter these seas and they are not open to international shipping anymore, the People's Liberation Army will take control, and everybody should get out immediately. That is why if we want to have an idea of what is going on in the South China Sea, then we have to follow the developments in Chinese domestic politics and economy as well.

*For one thing, the Philippines have just brought this case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, they aim to sue China. Vietnam is hesitating, but it is possible that the Vietnamese government will join in it too.*

I just do not think that there is any possibility that China will make any compromise on the South China Seas. The Hague has no means to force them to do so. Chinese people and politicians are very good negotiators, they can make a lot of compromises, but there are certain things that they will never give up, and one of those things is the question of sovereignty. They cannot do that because of this national identity issue, because of the whole People's Republic of China is built on the concept that the ancient Chinese Empire has to be revived, China's greatness needs to be restored, and everything believed to once belong to China has to be taken back. The modern Chinese nation is built on and held together by that concept, and no Chinese leader can make any compromise in that.

\* \* \*

© ICRP 2015  
<http://culturalrelations.org>  
[institute@culturalrelations.org](mailto:institute@culturalrelations.org)

Duong, Y., 2015. Interview with Gergely Salát. *Cultural Relations Quarterly Review*, Vol. 2. Issue 2. (Spring 2015) pp.43–52.

For more information concerning the article and citation please contact us via email at [institute@culturalrelations.org](mailto:institute@culturalrelations.org)