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Competing Strategies of US and China: Prospects for Militarization of the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the competition between China and the US is threatening the regional stability and argues that the rivalry between the big powers which is driven by economic, military, political and technological, interests is further increasing the risk of militarization and creating a security paradox in the region. The research also highlights China's territorial claims that actually drive its actions in the region and further shed light on its historical grievances. This study viewed the China-US competition through the lens of neo-realism, meaning both states are taking extreme measures in the pursuit of their selfish interests. Moreover, this study is aligned with the SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and strong Institutions) and explain how the China-US competition hinders the progress, towards achieving the SDG 16. Lastly, intense rivalry between two dominant powers is directly undermining the efforts to achieve, peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: South China Sea, China-US Rivalry, Strategic Competition, Security Paradox, Neorealism, Militarization, Historical Claims, China, US, UNCLOS.

1. Introduction

The South China Sea is one of the most geopolitically significant regions in the world due to its strategic location and economic resources. It encompasses an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers (Chacon, 2024) and is boarded by China, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. It is considered as one of the most critical maritime corridor as it connects the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. In 2023, it is estimated that 10 billion barrels of petroleum and 6.7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas passed through the waters of SCS (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). It's also home to some of the most incredible marine life on the planet. Furthermore one third of global shipping, worth \$5.3 Trillion and approximately 60% of the global maritime trade passes through its waters annually (CSIS). The South China Sea is also home to some of the key maritime chokepoints such as The Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok.

In the recent years the South China Sea has become a central point of the global geopolitics. China's rapid economic growth and military modernization enabled it to become a dominant power in the SCS. Over the years China has build artificial islands and established military installations to solidify its presence in the region (MEMRI, 2024) China also uses naval patrols to enforce its maritime claims in the SCS. On the other hand USA, as a global maritime power conducts regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to counter China's excessive maritime claims (Freund, 2017) and also has established alliances and partnerships in the

region, particularly with the countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia & other South East Asian States, to maintain its position as a key player in the region.

Lastly this study aligns with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 of the United Nations, which is about Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The SCS dispute directly touches the core features of SDG 16, mainly the conflict resolution, Rule of Law and reduction of all kinds of violence (United Nations). By linking the China-US competition in the SCS to SDG 16, the study will provide crucial insight into how the competition between the two big powers is acting as hindrance in building an effective multilateral mechanism for cooperation and dispute resolution, which are the key Pillars of SDG 16. Hence by applying this framework, the research highlights how the China-US rivalry prevents the establishment of a cooperative and legal governance which is essential for assessing long lasting peace and stability in the region.

2. Literature Review

The study, China's Nine Dash Line Claim in light of the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, examines the legal and geopolitical implications of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling on China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The article provides a detailed analysis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and how this ruling had invalidated China's Nine-Dash Line claims. The study further highlights China's legal arguments and its historical point of view, including its rejection of the tribunal's jurisdiction and its continued assertion of sovereignty over disputed waters. Additionally, Woo and Kang explore the regional and global reactions to the ruling, noting that while the Philippines and other claimant states welcomed the decision, China dismissed it as a biased ruling. The article also discusses the strategic consequences, particularly how the ruling influenced China-US tensions, freedom of navigation operations, and ASEAN's diplomatic stance (Korkut, E., & Hyun Kang, W, 2016).

This study thoroughly examines the legal aspects of the South China Sea rulings and the region's geopolitics but it does not talk about the resource exploitation that happens in the disputed waters.

The research paper, Historical Mistake and the USA-China Global Rivalry: The South China Sea Dispute which got published in International Journal of Politics and Security, discovers the multidimensional nature of the South China Sea conflict, focuses on its geopolitical, geostrategic, military and legal dimensions. This article argues that China's territorial claims over the South China Sea have intensified regional tensions. The study also explains how the South China Sea dispute has evolved from a regional issue into a global power show between China and the US. Furthermore, this research examines the historical context of China's territorial claims, traces its assertiveness and the strategic motivations in the region. The paper also examines the legal aspects of this conflict, including international maritime laws and the arbitration ruling of 2016 that challenge China's expansive Nine-Dash Line claims. Additionally, the study explores the military dynamics of the region, and gives insight into China's naval expansion and the US response through freedom of navigation operations and its alliances with other regional actors (Bican, 2023). The study thoroughly explains the military and geopolitical aspects of the South China Sea dispute but there's a very limited analysis on diplomatic strategies and their effectiveness in easing the regional tensions.

A book, *US-China Strategic Competition: towards a New Power Equilibrium*, traces the transformation of China-US relations from the Cold War era. Ali highlights that the shifting balance of power has led to uncertainty in the structures of global security. This study also explores the Asian Pivot strategy, assessing how the US has maintained its presence in the region to limit China's growing influence. Moreover, the book also explains the economic and military dimensions of the rivalry between China and US. He emphasized on how defense strategies, trade and diplomatic policies shapes this competition (Ali, 2015). The study thoroughly covers the security and military aspects of US-China competition, but it do not address the soft power diplomacy and non-traditional security challenges, such as economic interdependence and cyber threats.

The article, *Sino-US Competition in the South China Sea: Power, Rules and Legitimacy* which was published in the *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, examines the evolving geopolitical rivalry between China and the US in the SCS. This article discovers three key factors shaping this competition: the third party involvement, disputes over maritime laws and lastly the power dynamics. The research argues that the China-US rivalry intensified after 2009, with multiple factors dominating at different periods. The study highlights how China's maritime expansion and US freedom of navigation operations have contributed to escalating tensions, and also reinforcing the security dilemma in the region. Furthermore, the article also discusses the role of ASEAN and regional actors and highlights their strategic responses to the growing competition (Hu, 2021). While this research thoroughly examines the political and security dimensions of China-US competition in the South China Sea, it provides limited analysis on the economic consequences.

China's military modernization and expansion in the South China Sea are actually direct responses to perceived threats from US alliances. The US alliance system remains resilient, and is adapting to China's rise through strengthened defense agreements and military cooperation with the allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia (Liff, 2018). The Existing research discusses China's opposition to US alliances, but there is little analysis on whether China's security frameworks can effectively replace or coexist with the current system.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this Study the theory of Neo-Realism is used, which is developed by Kenneth Waltz in his seminal work *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, neo-realism states that the states work in a self-help system where there's no central authority to enforce rules or provide security (Waltz, 1979) In this perspective, states are rational, unitary actors and they prioritize their survival by maximizing their strength and influence. According to Waltz, the power distribution plays a major role in shaping how states interact with each other, Be It unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar.

In the context of the South China Sea, neo-realism gives a framework for understanding how the structure of International Relations shapes the actions of the states and how it influences the regional stability. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, including the militarization of artificial islands and its historical territorial claims, can be seen as China's efforts to create regional dominance and also to secure strategic advantages. Similarly, The USA has its own interests in the region and it wants to contain China's significant dominance in the South China Sea and for that US has maintained a strong military presence in the region by conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations and also by forging alliances with South East

Asian States. Furthermore, the states are taking extreme measures for their own national interest and there's almost no accountability, hence the theory of neo-realism is best suitable for this study.

4. Research Methodology & Design

This study investigates the China-US rivalry in South China Sea by using the mixed Research Approach. This approach likely provides the clear understanding of the geopolitical rivalry between the two big powers and how it's undermining the regional stability by examining the reports along with news and journal articles. This research is also aimed at understanding the impact of US alliances and how they're fuelling or containing the China-US rivalry In the SCS. Data collection also involves examining historical records, policy analyses and regional and international perspectives on the SCS dispute. The article focuses on identifying patterns of behaviors, strategic interests and how this big power rivalry is jeopardizing the security situation in the region.

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Genesis of the South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea has been a crucial maritime route for centuries. Ancient Chinese dynasties like Han and Tang had documented their interactions with the Sea (Hsu, 1988) However, at that time, the concept of territorial sovereignty over SCS did not existed. The region's dynamics were shaped by the overlapping zones of influence & informal control. Later in the colonial era, the European powers like Britain, Spain, Portugal & Netherlands had established dominance over The SCS. During this period, China was suffering from internal strife and external pressures and was really weak to assert its control over the region. Then after the end of WW2, the world saw a significant shift in the SCS's geopolitical landscape, as the newly independent states were formed in South East Asia.

During the Cold War period, The SCS became a battleground for superpower competition, the United States was determined to contain communism and started establishing military bases and alliances in South East Asia. On the other hand China was supporting the communist movements and its influence was rapidly increasing in the region. The world saw a surge in tensions with the competing for control over The SCS. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea gave a proper framework for maritime claims (UNCLOS, 1982) but it further fueled disputes as the nations were not certain about their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and continental shelves.

The Cold War finally ended in the late 1991, but it didn't diminish The SCS's strategic importance, instead SCS became a focal point of China's rising influence and for US it became a center of attraction in Asia.

5.2 China's Historical Nine Dash Line Claims and UNCLOS

What are China's territorial claims and from where they are coming from? China Under both the Nationalist and Communist Governments has claimed sovereignty over majority of the SCS, on the basis of ancient maps and historical records. The Nine-Dash Line actually serve as the basis for China's territorial claims, It is basically a demarcation line first introduced by the Republic of China In The Year 1947, at that time the Chinese government published an official map of SCS, which featured a U-shaped line with the eleven dashes, later in the year 1952 the number of dashes got reduced to nine because of China's negotiations with Vietnam over the Gulf of Tonkin. Furthermore, it was later adopted by the People's Republic of China (Caruana,

2023). However, China's historical claims overlap with those of other littoral states, including Vietnam, Philippines and Malaysia; hence the SCS has become a flashpoint of tension and competition among multiple states, each hungry for power and wealth and wants to maintain strong position in this strategically critical region.

Later, In July 2016, at Hague, the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration rejected China's expensive claims under the Nine-Dash Line, the claim was bought by Philippines against China under UNCLOS. However, China has refused to accept the ruling and claimed that it was null and void and highly biased towards Philippines (Campbell, C., & Salidjanova, N., 2016) Furthermore, China has increased its efforts to solidify its dominance in the region and constructed ports and deployed its military in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, It has also militarized Woody Island by deploying radar system, fighter jets and cruise missiles (Herman, 2016)

6. China-US Competing Strategies and Endeavors in the South China Sea

The SCS has become a critical point for the world's geopolitics, where two big powers like China and US are competing over diplomatic, economic and strategic influence. China is seeking to increase its influence and it wants to become a dominant power in the region by using its historical ties with the sea, whereas US doesn't want China to become a dominant power in the SCS, as it could weaken the US influence in Asia. Both these powers are following competing strategies to counter each other's influence in political, economic, military and technological domains, hence further militarizing and worsening the already complicated landscape of the SCS region.

6.1 Political Strategies and Endeavors

Politically both China and US are trying to curb each other's influence, China is following the revisionist policies whereas US talks about maintaining western led International order. China's Policy revolves around its historical claims and considers Nine-Dash Line as an absolute claim, rooted in ancient maritime maps, on which China cannot compromise. In contrast to this, the US focuses on multilateralism and emphasizes that China should abide the UNCLOS, and US frames China's actions as violations of international law. For instance, in the 2023 ASEAN Regional Forum, US successfully lobbied for a joint statement that not directly condemned China's actions because of its influence, but did emphasized on the uphold of International law in the SCS (ASEAN, 2023) Whereas, China actively engages with Cambodia and also strengthened its China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement that was signed in 2020 (FTA, 2020) Hence, by using economic leverages, China influences Cambodia to block or oppose the ASEAN consensus on the SCS dispute (Cambodianess, 2022)

Furthermore, the dynamics in the domestic politics are further fueling this rivalry. For instance Malaysia has deepened its economic ties with China (Al Jazeera, 2024) despite the fact that Malaysia has its own claims in the SCS. In contrast to this there was a dramatic shift under the presidency of Marcos Jr, with the expansion of the Philippines 2023 EDCA which was driven by public outrage over Chinese Coast Guard aggressions. The domestic policies of these South East Asian states are directly affecting the rivalry between China and US, especially The EDCA between Philippines and US, is driving China to take more aggressive actions against Philippines to counter US influence in the region.

6.2 Economic Strategies and Endeavors

The South China Sea is resourcefully rich area, and all the states surrounding this region wants to get hold of those resources, over the years the SCS has become a battleground for control over the energy reserves buried beneath its water, and on its top class fisheries and lastly on its strategically important trade routes. China through Belt and Road Initiative is developing its infrastructure, as it wants to be less dependent on the Strait of Malacca because of its vulnerabilities. Furthermore, China and US are actively involved in the hydro-carbon competition, China has been pursuing hydrocarbon exploration through state owned companies like China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China also has been criticized for drilling in disputed areas like Vanguard Bank. On the other hand US counter China's territorial claims through Freedom of Navigation Operations, other than that it often criticize China's actions on diplomatic platforms. US also influence the regional dynamics by strengthening its alliances with regional actors like the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam.

Furthermore, the US promotes economic partnerships through the initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Framework and Blue Dot network, to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and offers Alternative Infrastructure investments (Geason). Other than that, The presence of US Navy in the SCS often direct criticism not just from China but from other claimant states as well, because its concerning for other states, that US ships are patrolling in their Exclusive Economic Zones.

6.3 Military Strategies and Endeavors

The US and China are competing to exert power in the region, through militarizing the SCS. China is following its Anti-Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy in the SCS where as US relay on its Indo-Pacific command, this command plays an important role in maintaining stability, and to foster alliances in the region (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024) Basically US relays heavily on its allies to increase its influence in the SCS. For instance, Balikatan Exercises held annually between the US and Philippines, in which US use its high-tech weaponry, including its submarines, missiles and aircraft carriers, including its NMESIS anti-ship missile system (CASTRO, P., & France-Presse, A., 2025) to counter China's expensive claims in the SCS.

China often frames US actions in the sea as bullying, For example in the 2024 Balikatan Exercises, which included live-fire drills have risen the tensions amid multiple confrontation between the Philippines vessels and the Chinese Coast Guard in the SCS, as for China this is the violation of its territorial integrity, as parts of the drill were staged outside the Philippines territorial limit which is 19km, and not just this but outside of its exclusive economic zone, which extends about 370km, so this ignited a strong response from China's side, as it disrupted at least one live fire exercise in the SCS (Aspinwall, 2024) Hence China considers these exercises as provocation or bullying from the US side. Moreover the countries like Australia and Japan also take part in these bilateral exercises, around 200 Australian Defense Force personnel took part in the 2024 bilateral exercises that conducted between US and Philippines, (Defense, 2024) Hence the involvement of these regional actors is alarming for China and compels it to be more Cautious. Other then Philippines US also have developed good relations with other claimant states specially with Vietnam and Malaysia, and China is always ready to curb the Increasing US influence in the region by countering US advances diligently.

China is continuously enhancing its military capabilities and one of the most prominent example is its Fujian Aircraft Carrier which is the world's 3rd largest aircraft carrier and China completely made it on its own, it was launched in the SCS in May, 2024 by the Chinese authorities (Felstead, 2024). China has also developed DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles which have been called as Guam Express, and is considered as significant advancement in China's missile capabilities. Guam is an important area for both China and US, it's an unincorporated territory of the US and hosts key maritime installations, from where US conducts its military operations in the Asia-Pacific, (Portal, 2025) it has the range to reach Guam that's why it is named as "Guam Express (Wilson, 2016). Hence we see both powers are trying to maintain maritime superiority in the region, by containing each other's influence. Moreover, there have been multiple confrontations between Chinese and US ships and aircrafts over the sea. For example, the US P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft in which the media journalists were aboard was on a surveillance mission when shadowed by a Chinese J-11 fighter jet for over an hour in the sea. The Chinese fighter jet was ready to intercept the US aircraft by positioning itself barely 500 feet away from the port side of the aircraft. China has accused US of spying notably through its aircrafts patrolling over the SCS whereas the US asserts that the American aircrafts & ships only patrol in the areas where International Law allows them. China also insists that the US activities are the major reason of the escalating tensions in the SCS (Dangwal, 2023). China and US often get involved in these kind of confrontations, and many times it gets unnoticed because of the repetition of the same events.

6.4 Technological Strategies and Endeavors

Over the years, the SCS has become a hot point for AI-Driven warfare, undersea networks and advanced dual-use infrastructure. Both China and US are competing to launch latest technologies to enhance their influence in the SCS region. China's Underwater Great Wall, which is basically an observation system and a network of sensors, that are linked to the Artificial Islands and is capable of real-time location and tracing the targets whether on the surface or under the water. This system is a part of China's broader objective to monitor the activities in the SCS, but the US has the type of Virginia-Class submarines that cannot be easily detected, (Citadel, 2024) moreover Chinese and International media often reports about the detection of US Unmanned underwater vehicles Or underwater drones in the SCS, recent reports suggests that US navy is planning to use Extra-large Unmanned Undersea Vehicle (XLUV), which has been called as Orca, in the South China Sea, to counter China (Recognition, 2025)

China's remote-sensing satellite Yaogan-41, had been launched into the Geostationary Orbit, on December 15, 2023, according to Chinese media this satellite is going to be used for agricultural monitoring, land surveys, disaster prevention and weather forecasting but western observers say that Yaogan-41 is primarily a military satellite and Yaogan program supports the space factor of the People's Liberation Army, (Swope, 2024) as Yaogan literally translates into remote sensing. Analysts believe that through this satellite China can have continues surveillance of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as Mainland China and Taiwan (Clark, 2023) So we see, China is investing a lot in the radar coverage of the SCS, from Hainan Island to its basis in Spratly and Paracel Islands, China has an uninterrupted chain of radar system, (Executive, 2024) to deter US and its allies from entering into its waters.

6.5 The China-US Security Paradox

China's militarization of the SCS exemplified by its creation of seven artificial islands which are equipped with Radars, Missile Systems and Airstrips has fundamentally changed the security landscape in the region. For instance, under the influence of its A2/AD strategy, China is further militarizing the region to deter US and its allies, as it perceived threats from the external forces and often criticize their involvement in the region. China is further advancing its military capabilities to project its power in the region. On the other hand the US significantly solidifies its position in the region under the EDCA by showing its military capabilities. For instance the use of HIMARS missile system in the Balakatan Exercises and the deployment of MQ-9 Reaper drone in the Philippines (Lariosa, 2024) The MQ-9 Reaper is known for its long-range surveillance and its brilliant striking capabilities and plays a crucial role in intelligence gathering and deterrence (Citadel., 2023) The major reason for the militarization of this region is the China's remarkable rise in the economic domain, that challenged the US dominance in the larger Indo-Pacific region, hence to counter China's growing influence US is taking every possible measure, from propagating against China on every world forum to snatching the deals from Chinese companies to militarizing the SCS region in the light of Freedom of Navigation operations, that further escalate the tensions among China and other claimants. Moreover China's militarization of the region is the result of its historical grievances, as China considers itself vulnerable because of its open borders, as it borders with 14 other states. Hence China's Nine-Dash Line claims, basically secure its borders that's why it can't compromise on these claims, and the presence of external forces, mainly the US and its allies, further prompting China to take more aggressive approach. Additionally, the competition between two big powers is reshaping the balance of power in the region and also jeopardizing the security of other states. The Militarization of SCS region by both China-US and even other claimants, reflect a neorealist logic of balancing, where states seek to counter perceived threats through military buildup (M. Parent, 2015).

7. Conclusion

The competition between China and US in the SCS is entering a new phase with China's major focus on coast guard militarization, and since it's difficult for US ships to move freely in the Sea, without getting noticed by the Chinese coast guard hence, US relays heavily on high-tech deterrence to curb China's dominance in the SCS. Despite all this neither side is seeking an open conflict, so this rivalry will likely be seen in proxy disputes as it's not just China and US who have their interests in the SCS but other claimant states also have their interests over which they have conflicting views, for instance Vietnam and Philippines have territorial dispute over a resourcefully rich Sandy Cay reef in the Spratly Island (Philstar, 2025) Moreover we can expect a legal warfare between the two big power, as China and US both challenges each-others actions in the multilateral platforms. The one thing that can offer a rare avenue for de-escalation could be Environmental Cooperation among them.

Lastly, the SCS has become a microcosm of 21st century's geopolitics, meaning a space in which history, technology and ecology combine together to reshape the power dynamics. Now by looking into this rivalry from a Neorealist perspective, it's evident that neo-realism explains the structural drivers of the competition between two big powers, by highlighting the anarchic structure of world, in which states are compelled to balance against each-other, in the pursuit of their national interests.

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