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# **US-China Relations on the South China Sea & it's Impact**

## **Offensive Realism and Power Transition Theory Analysis**

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**Research Paper**

Published by Tillotoma Foundation || September, 2022

**2022**

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**Will there be a direct conflict between US and China in the South China Sea? With its geopolitical advantages, the South China Sea is a focal point for analyzing the US-China relations. Using descriptive studies supported by factual data, this essay will examine the applicability of two academic theories of International Relations, namely Offensive Realism and Power Transition Theory, in the South China Sea dispute. Generally, the two theories provide the same assumption about US-China relations in the South China Sea as rivalries. However, since the core elements are different, they provide two different predictions of the future of the South China Sea. Furthermore, the paper aims to provide a brief analysis of the impacts of the US-China tensions in the South China Sea, or the Indo-Pacific region on a larger scale, on the neighboring players, notably Japan, ASEAN, and their corporation.**

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The traditional dispute in the South China Sea starts with the territorial claims between the People's Republic of China, represented by the nine-dash line on the map, and a group of ASEAN countries, namely Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. In response, the United States initially implemented a "keep-a-distance" policy towards the SCS issue, especially taking a neutral view on the sovereignty among claimants while demanding peaceful resolutions in the region (Feng & He, 2018). Accordingly, China's strategies during the peak were regarded as "Slow Intensity Conflict" (Scobell, 2000) and prominently defensive by signing Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the SCS in 2002 (Alenezi, 2020). The US-China relationship during the time was not intense. American attitude towards China targeted jointly favorable assimilation into the world market (Niebel, 2020).

However, thanks to the rise in power, China's policy transformed into an offensive strategy. Due to the escalation in the SCS from 2008, the US had to modify its actions. Noticeably, China interfered with oil cables in Vietnam and, for the first time, warned to eject American oil corporations along Vietnam's coast (Widian & Arimadona, 2018). Moreover, China's submission of the nine-dash line map to the UN in 2010 indicates the fundamental element of China's offensive strategy (Lanteigne, 2019, as cited in Alenezi, 2020). In response, the critical strategy of the US is routinized Free of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) since 2015, in which then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized representing a national interest and resisting "the use of force by any claimant" during the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (Fravel, 2014).

China's ambitions to become a hegemon, whether regional or international, by conducting several acts in the Indo-Pacific region have gradually become a pivot for potential changes, varying from within to other state actors' behaviors and international organizations. Since regarded as a power vacuum in the international community, the US has become an inevitable actor in

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responding to China's rise. With its geopolitical advantages, the South China Sea (SCC) is a focal point for analyzing the US-China relation (Kim, 2015). Using descriptive studies supported by factual data, this essay will examine the applicability of two schools, namely Offensive Realism (OR) and Power Transition Theory (PTT), in the case of the SCC dispute. Generally, the two theories provide the same assumption about US-China relations in the SCS as rivalries. However, since the core elements are different, they provide two different predictions of the future of the SCS. Both theories mainly characterize the common feature of US-China relations as rivalries. As a result, the paper aims to provide a further overview of the impacts of US-China tension in the SCS, or Indo-Pacific region on a larger scale, on their neighbors, notably Japan, ASEAN, and their corporation.

### **A. Why is the South China Sea Important**

The SCS is a strategic geopolitical region that serves as a corridor for one-third of seaborne international trade while holding a substantial amount of oil and natural gas (Erickson & Kennedy, 2016). Therefore, this region not only provides a pivot for global sea commerce but also serves as a crucible of war (Hayton, 2014). On the other hand, Ross (1999) identifies China's mainland domination and US Navy maritime occupation in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the US is interested in keeping control of the region while resisting any external power. Accordingly, China aims to gain influence and overcome existing domination in the SCS. However, their interests are differently analyzed under the scope of OR and PTT theories.

### **B. Offensive Realism Theory, Analysis, and Predictions**

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Offensive Realism (OR) highlights the regional hegemon's competition rather than the global hegemon, which assumes that global hegemon is not possible in the international community (Layne, 2002). Power refers to military might and sometimes is followed by latent power, featuring an economic one. This realization underpins the conversion of latent power into military expenditures (Mearsheimer, 2007). States are assumed to try anything to gain power and secure their survival. OR considers geographic characteristics of states, apart from their power capacity. Due to proximate geographic limitations, states tend to focus more on regional rather than extra-regional powers (Layne, 2002). Therefore, apart from conventional balancing, regional hegemons can adopt buck-passing policies to nearby great powers as an offshore balance (Mearsheimer, 2001). OR views states regarding their geographic location and power when assessing states' tendencies. Generally, war comes with larger gaps between the most prominent regional hegemons.

In the case of traditional SCS disputes, Offensive Realism can explain why the United States remained neutral and was scarcely involved in the SCS dispute based on geographic limitations. On the other hand, since OR mainly circulates the rivalry among great powers, the US viewed China as a rising power neither on a regional nor global scale then. However, the situation significantly shifted since China's offensive strategies in 2008. Specifically, China's nine-dashed line may threaten existing FON there, providing the state a jurisdiction to approve or reject vessels leaving or entering (Rowan, 2005). Therefore, former US ambassador Harvey Feldman, acknowledged that China's further offensive moves in South China Sea may gain them a "Chinese lake" (2000, p.63). As a result, the US has to take action to maintain its regional influence.

Considering the US as a regional hegemon acting in another region with more than one great power (China) and insular states, according to Elman (2004), the US would buck-pass to

insular states, especially those that have prominently been in territorial disputes with China. In practice, President Obama emphasized the rebalance strategy in Asia, in which US's attention shifted to Asia-Pacific (Alenezi, 2020) and set up security alliances while redeploying military power in the region (Furgacz, 2014). Specifically, the US-Vietnam versus US-Philippines maritime alliances are examples. From 2010 to 2013, a comprehensive maritime partnership was in progress for Vietnam and was finally declared on annual defense discussions and reciprocal marine trips (Fravel, 2014). Along with the 2015 mutual vision statement, the US successfully presented closer to China-Vietnam's disputed land (Kikuchi & Arakaki, 2017). Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement marked US-Philippines maritime alliance, in which the US was allowed to rent four air bases close to the disputed land. Both agreed on yearly joint naval exercises, namely "Balikatan" (Kikuchi & Arakaki, 2017).

On the other hand, by counting on Japan, a reliable partner of ASEAN states, Washington is believed to be more ensured in keeping a safe distance from the buck-passed states (Mearsheimer, 2001, as cited in Steinsson, 2014). The latest joint act between the two alliances in SCS is its first joint anti-submarine drill, conducted by Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force and US Navy on November 16, 2021. This act is meant to perform their navy capabilities and strengthen their partnership during China's assertive regional acts (Johnson, 2021).

As one of the great powers in the region, confronting the extra-regional US, China would take preemptive acts to stop the hegemon by simultaneously minimizing the offshore balance of the US and reaching par with Japan, Russia,... (Elman, 2004; Steinsson, 2014). Since China aims at a regional hegemony position to best guarantee its survival, economic power in China translated to military might noticeably triple during 2000-2011 (Mislán, 2017, as cited in Alenezi, 2020) indicates the attempt. By introducing Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) to its neighbors in need of

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infrastructure, Chinese footprints have become gradually troubling for the US and its allies. Specifically, Japan identifies the geo-economic project as a means to reconfigure ASEAN, a comprehensive strategic partnership with the state, and shatter its unity (Nagy, 2022). However, the US presence in the SCS prevents China from achieving its goal of regional (Fravel, 2014). Therefore, the state has to attempt to gain control of the region. China's strategy's core lies in its expansion of maritime presence through the Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces of 2013 and China's Military Strategy of 2015. Both emphasize maritime expansion as a means to preserve sovereign interests (The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, 2013; China's Military Strategy, 2015). These actions aim at deterring US Naval from future interference in "China's sovereign islands" (Boje, 2016, p.35, as cited in Alenezi, 2020). Additionally, China's building of artificial islands enhances its military might by supplying advanced military equipment in the SCS (Broderick, 2015).

With rising fears of Asian countries from China's domination and efforts to preserve its global position, the US is expected to continue offshore balancing by supplying technologies to its security alliances (Murray, 2015). On the other hand, Mearsheimer (2007) argues that when buck-pass seems ineffective, the US, the regional hegemon, would directly balance against China, a great power. Meanwhile, China will attempt to overthrow US's position and achieve at least its complete regional hegemony in Asia, especially under Xi Jinping's offensive policy (Ataka, 2016).

### **C. Power Transition Theory, Analysis, and Predictions**

Power Transition Theory (PTT) circulates the power flow rather than the static position of states. In contrast to realism, PTT concludes that wars come with more power distribution among states (Lemke, 2017). In other words, the more distributive power, the more likely conflicts arise.

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Along with the power parity, PTT marks dissatisfied rising powers based on national interest as a threat to dominant states. Generally, the theory views states with their intention and proximate powers parity in assessing the tendencies (Lebow, 1994). Therefore, according to the Dynamic Theory, power transitions and parity are causes of conflicts rather than balancing (Lemke, 2017). In SCC disputes, the US stands as a hegemon, while China shifted from a satisfied rising power to a dissatisfied one.

According to the Benign Power transition, two kinds of power are not regarded as threats: satisfied rising power (due to the lack of intention) and weak dissatisfied power (due to the lack of causing challenges capability) (Goldstein, 2007). Applying to the SCS, US's neutral prominent policy towards China and the SCC dispute is due to China's satisfying characteristics. In US's status quo principle, coastal states shall respect the UNCLOS, including peaceful resolutions in the EEZ (McDevitt, 2015). Therefore, upon China's series of interfering with disputed states since 2008 and indirect warning to the US, Washington believes the state has started to present dissatisfaction. Specifically, China's de facto policy on confronting and blocking fishing boats of disputed states since 2013 violates the UNCLOS, given its ratified status (Murray, 2015). Moreover, China's rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the 2016 July 12 case is a breach of international law (French, 2017). Therefore, the US-China relationship turned into a rivalry between the hegemon and rising dissatisfied power.

According to Hegemon Policy Goals, all hegemons will try to ensure all states are satisfied by providing resources, especially the rising power, to minimize their intention to cause wars (Chan, 2004). Meanwhile, they will keep dissatisfied power weak enough to eliminate potential challenges. Under the scope of SCS disputes, the US is anticipated to eliminate China's strength if it cannot make the state satisfied. The strategies resist China's rise by deploying naval units and



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the Air-Sea Battle Concept (ASB) in the SCS (Furgacz, 2014). The US Department of Defense (DOD) would publish an ASB document, posing a challenge for attackers to battle the clout of the US and its allies (Air-Sea Battle, 2013). Additionally, DOD adopted Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense of 2012 and the National Security Strategy of 2015, reaffirming its military presence in the SCS and leadership position. Moreover, since the economy plays a crucial role in China's rise, the US attempted to weaken the might by focusing on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Alenezi, 2020). The organization serves as an Asia economic NATO to disconnect economic relations between China and Asian states, where the US had knowingly eliminated China from the association discussions (Southgate, 2017). On the other hand, US' most reliable Asia ally – Japan, as influenced by the state, has conducted several acts to preserve the US-lead existing international order. By generating strategic diplomatic policies, Japan has provided ASEAN states with a rule-based alternative to China's initiatives, noticeably Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Koga, 2022). By exercising its unique brand of developing contribution diplomacy, Japan has successfully conducted the containment strategy, as perceived by China, in response to China's rise in the region (Chen, 2018), which would significantly affect the situation in the SCS.

As previously discussed, China has an intention to become a regional hegemon. The theory contemplates that the power parity shall be close between the two actors to anticipate potential conflicts. In comparable power comparison, US-China parity is not far off (PTT in Sino-US). Economically speaking, the scale of China's economy has multiplied two times per seven years with a yearly 10% growth rate (Allison, 2017), compared to 3% of the US (Kroenig, 2020). China will become the strongest in the military field by 2035, while US Navy needs 500 additional ships by 2045, according to Trump's secretary of defense, to balance the Chinese Navy (Niebel, 2020).

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However, despite China's considerable expansion, some scholars argue that the US's power center is still unreachable for China (Hung, 2015). On the other hand, China still stands a possibility of reaching the US; however, it will take a very long time. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, Power Transition Theory anticipates no direct conflict between the two states because the US will attempt to widen its power gap (Teixeira, 2021).

#### **D. Further Discussion: US-China Tensions and their Impacts on Regional States (featuring Japan) & International Organizations (featuring ASEAN)**

In comparison, there is a common ground that both theories regard US-China relations as rivalries while anticipating no upcoming direct conflicts in the foreseeable future. Therefore, its long, intense relationships shall impact regional security. On the other hand, the SCS dispute is closely related to the Southeast Asia situation; it is noteworthy that not until the dispute occurred did China's involvement in the region gradually evolve to become a pivot for change (Nagy, 2022). Therefore, China's actions in the SCS are the most straightforward examples of China's rise, which greatly influence other state actors to a great extent, irrespective of their being claimants to the issue. Meanwhile, US's weight is heavy. However, it is imperative that US-China relations in the SCS, or even in the context of observing China's rise, shall not be seen without mentioning other state actors, notably Japan and ASEAN states (Nagy, 2022).

Being a crucial partner of the US in the region, Japan views China's artificial island militarization in the SCS as a threat to the existing sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) (Nagy, 2022). Meanwhile, China's assertive behaviors within the region are a foundation of Japan's active involvement in economic and diplomatic sectors in Southeast Asia and South Asia (Nagy, 2022). Accordingly, due to that reason, ASEAN states have to look for extra-regional partners, primarily

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for autonomy enhancement. The Japan-ASEAN relationship has gradually developed through mutual understanding in visions, notably through FOIP and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Ha, 2019). However, the tension between US and China has led to two responses from the actors: while Japan has constantly balanced against China, ASEAN states use hedging strategies to maximize benefits from the corporation with both sides and minimize the possibility of taking sides (Emmers, 2018). The more impactfully China rises, the more challenging it becomes for Japan-ASEAN states relationship in terms of possible domination (Nguyen, 2022). Generally, Japan serves as the ideal "third option" for ASEAN to enjoy their profits without direct engagement with either China or US (Nagy, 2022). On the other hand, the roles of the US and China in the SCS dispute, in particular, contribute significantly to the cooperation between Japan and ASEAN states, featuring political instability and a center of concern, respectively (Nagy, 2022).

### **E. Conclusion and Analytical Remarks**

In conclusion, both Offensive Realism and Power Transition Theory can prove their explanatory power by applying theories to factual data. Moreover, they have provided two separate analyses and predictions on the SCS dispute when assessing the US-China relationship.

The main difference between OR and PTT lies in the static versus dynamic characteristics and agent focus, reflected in the characteristics of predictions. While OR anticipates a specific tendency for states over time, PTT's expectation dramatically fluctuates depending on the relative power parity between states rather than the states themselves. However, due to states' autonomy, theories can only predict parts of the situation, while states usually do not conform to any anticipations from scholars.

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On the other hand, assessing any situation in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region involves more than two main actors in the dispute. When it comes to power parity and close connections between the states, the research shall be done without abandoning any relative actors. In the scope of US-China tension in the South China Sea, Japan-ASEAN relations and their policies are significantly influenced by the intense relationship between US and China. However, US-ASEAN corporation-related research has not been conducted much in the IR field, which leaves room for many ambiguities and predictions. Especially during the dilemma of the Russia-Ukraine conflicts, in which Russia's assertive acts, if not facing any consequences, may motivate China's ambitions of thriving for a hegemon position in the region (Nagy, 2022).

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