



Sino-US strategic rivalry and regional security dynamics in the South China Sea

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Abstract:

The South China Sea is a crucial region that has become a focal point of territorial disputes and geopolitical tensions between China and its neighbouring countries, resulting in complex security dynamics. Against this backdrop, the US has sought to counter China's assertiveness in the region, resulting in a strategic rivalry that has far-reaching implications for regional security. The study's theoretical framework is based on Neo-realism, which posits that state behaviour in the international system is driven by self-interest and the desire for power and security. The concepts of offensive realism and balance of power play a supportive role in the research. The researcher adopted a qualitative method to carry out this study. Drawing on existing literature and analysis, this study explores the emerging China-US rivalry and key drivers behind their rivalry in the South China Sea, including economic and military factors, as well as broader geopolitical considerations. China has concentrated on developing its military capabilities and increasing its influence in the region through diplomatic, military, and economic means. Furthermore, this strategic rivalry affected the regional security dynamics that led to the militarisation of the SCS, an arms race, alliances, instability, and heightened regional tensions.

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1. Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS), which is a part of the Pacific Ocean, stretches from the Strait of Malacca to the Taiwan Strait and is at the strategic crossroads connecting the Pacific and the Indian Ocean on one hand and Northeast and Southeast Asia on the other. In addition to China, there are six other significant claimant parties: Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Brunei. Meanwhile, China claimed most of the SCS, and it has a strong military and strategic influence over the disputed territories (Kumar & Shah, 2018). China claims most of the South China Sea with its nine-dash line, which was formally presented to the UN in 2009. China has said that it discovered, occupied, and ruled the South China Sea around two thousand (2000) years ago when the Han Dynasty was in power (Hong, 2012). However, China has no strong evidence to back up its historical claims over the area. Most interestingly, international maritime law, as written in the UNCLOS 1982, doesn't recognize China's historical claims over the SCS waters. The Court of Arbitration decided in favor of the Philippines regarding the Scarborough Shoal dispute in the South China Sea in July 2016. China has been prohibited from granting its historical rights to natural resources and the construction of the islands on Mischief Reef because Beijing has been found guilty of violating the sovereignty of the Philippines and its rights to the exploitation of resources within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). While China strongly rejects the decision of the Arbitration Court (Kumar & Shah, 2018). However, for China and other claimant states, the SCS conflict is about territorial sovereignty, security, and political legitimacy, but the United States (US) neither accepts any state claim over the sovereignty of the South China Sea. China effectively occupies the South China Sea by creating artificial islands and demonstrating its ownership of the region. Washington intends to maintain its global maritime predominance and role as lead defender of the global commons while seeing the South China Sea as a key battlefield in the region (Scobell, 2018).

The US remained tranquil with China's rise until it was within the threshold of the Western liberal order. Beijing's military modernization and assertiveness of its sovereignty claim most of the SCS has created antagonism in China-US relations. The strategic confrontation between two leading political and economic powers, China and the US, in the South China Sea exemplifies the region's relevance in world politics. Tensions in the SCS have risen due to territorial disputes and lack of security due to diverse national and commercial interests on a regional and international level (Roudgar, 2017). It is one of the world's most volatile hotspots and the contested area between the US, China, and its neighbors. Since 2010, the attention paid to the SCS dispute has been unprecedented. The dynamics of the growing China-US rivalry are currently affecting regional security and stability, directly influencing the SCS dispute. The security of each state in a region interacts with the security of other states. There is generally significant security interdependence within a region, which creates challenges. China has chosen assertiveness, while the US intends to enhance its influence to counterbalance China's aggressiveness and rise in the region. Some claimant states want the US presence to stop China's expanding strategy in the SCS and have bilateral relations with China. As tensions

continue to rise, China's assertiveness and the US counter strategy have expanded the military presence in the SCS, threatening regional security dynamics and international peace.

2. Theoretical framework

This research study focuses on the China-US strategic rivalry in the SCS and uses this framework to determine how their rivalry affects the regional security dynamic in the SCS. To comprehensively analyze the China-US rivalry and regional security dynamic in the SCS, it is essential to consider multiple factors, including politics, economy, military, foreign policy, and other related elements. The theoretical framework is based on Neo-Realism. The realist perspective views states as single actors that act in a state of anarchy without a central authority. As a result, each state prioritizes its own safety and security above all else, leading to a constant fear and distrust of other states, thereby creating a potential for conflict (Toft, 2005, p. 383). Realism comprises three main realist categories These are classical, neo-realism, and neoclassical. The Neo-Realist perspective shifts focus away from human nature towards the international system's structure, suggesting that the structure determines the methods used by states to attain the desired level of security (Chen, 2013, p. 45). In the context of Neo-Realism, Defensive Realism holds that states simply preserve the existing balance of power and do not make any aggressive moves to acquire more power. On the other hand, Offensive Realism argues that states strive to acquire greater power in their pursuit of hegemony (Nincic, 2003, p. 29).

This study is anchored in John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realist perspective. He theorizes that states continuously seek to gain more power compared to other states to become the dominant power. According to Mearsheimer, as long as the international system remains in a state of anarchy, where states can harm each other and cannot trust each other, weaker states will continually increase their security to challenge stronger states, leading to an ongoing competition for security among all states (Jensen & Elman, 2018). Neorealist theory posits that state behavior in the international system is driven by the pursuit of self-interest and the desire for power and security. In the context of China-US rivalry in the South China Sea and regional security, neorealism would predict that both China and the United States are motivated by their desire to increase their power, expand their sphere of influence, and ensure their security in the region. In the South China Sea, neorealism would suggest that both China and the US are pursuing control over valuable resources and strategic waterways, which they see as crucial to their national interests. China, as a rising power, seeks to expand its sphere of influence and protect its territorial claims. In contrast, the US, as the dominant power in the region, seeks to maintain its dominant position and prevent the rise of potential threats to its security (Jensen & Elman, 2018).

The study also embedded neoclassical realism which builds on the foundation of neorealism, but on the importance of domestic politics and other factors that influence state behavior. Neoclassical realists argue that the international system is still anarchic and that states are

rational actors seeking to maximize their power and security. However, it also argues that domestic politics, such as the nature of a state's regime, the interests of its elites, and the values of its citizens, can play a significant role in shaping state behavior in international politics (Rose, 1998). Neo-classical realism helps us to understand the behavior and motivation of both China and the US in the SCS. China is a growing power to expand its influence while the US is the current global power to maintain its dominance. Neoclassical realism also helps us to understand China and the US as the domestic factors that are shaping the behavior of the states. Neoclassical realism also helps us to understand that China and the US are likely to manage their rivalry in the South China Sea. It suggests that states are likely to avoid conflict if they believe that the costs of conflict outweigh the benefits. China and the US are both nuclear-armed powers and a conflict between them would be very costly for both sides. This means that China and the US will likely try to manage their rivalry in the South China Sea.

3. Research methodology

Methodology refers to the process and techniques used for collecting and analyzing data (Polit et al., 1996). This research is descriptive and analytical because it uses existing knowledge for the evaluation of the phenomenon. This study is qualitative in nature because it does not involve any numerical or statistical data. The relevant information and data are utilized to instigate the analytical method for understanding and analyzing the US-China Strategic rivalry and regional security dynamics in the SCS. Both primary and secondary data have been used, but secondary data is most relied upon. Primary sources always include data that is very close to the event in question. On the other hand, Secondary sources are written by those who didn't see the event or haven't a close connection to it, but who may be able to add information and explanations that aren't in the primary sources (Frohmann, 1994). The research data includes official documents, books, Journal articles, newspaper articles, reports, and web sources.

4. Analysing the Sino-US strategic rivalry in the South China Sea

China-US rivalry started a long ago with ideological differences, one claimed to be a democratic state while the other called himself a communist state. Their different economic system intensifies their rivalry. The rivalry between China and the US occurs in different fields i.e. ideological, different political and economic systems, trade war, and power politics in the Pacific, particularly in the SCS. The US wants to free the SCS from the control of any state while upholding the principle of Free Navigation. On the other hand, China claims ownership over the maritime and land features while constructing an artificial island and deploying its navy in the SCS (Toruan, 2021, p. 85-86). The China-US rivalry arose in the SCS in the early years of the second decade of the 21st century and became the center of attention beyond the territorial claims and maritime resources.

America pursues China-US rivalry through the lens of the clash and conflict between China and other regional states in the SCS. On the other hand, China looks to the US's responses to

these clashes by taking the side of claimant states in the SCS. In May 2014, Vietnam and China got involved in a conflict over the oil resources. The situation was worsened by the deployment of the oil rig Haiyang Shiyou 981 for drilling in the Continental shelf of Vietnam. In response to the conflict, US official John Kerry declares Chinese action “proactive” against Vietnam. Washington encouraged Vietnam to follow international arbitration against China (Reuters, 2013). China-US rivalry is heightened by China’s assertiveness and the US’s proactive approach in the SCS to counter and contain China.

Beijing has commenced to influence and impose its norms and self well through diplomatic, economic, and military means in the SCS. China’s behaviour and actions aim to establish hegemonic stability and dominance in the region. Most developments in the SCS preponderate by the Chinese PLA(N) as their aggressiveness and assertiveness show that Beijing is behaving like a coercive hegemon. The US pursues this behaviour as a threat to its liberal rule-based order. The US adopted a proactive approach across the three successive administrations to maintain its supremacy (Usman, 2020). Most probably the SCS will remain an unwavering issue in the China-US rivalry. Many commentators and policy analysts in the US think that it’s time that the US adopt a harder approach toward China to prevent her from assertiveness and expansion. It is a fact that the two states will continue to be involved in the tug of war, legal contention, and balance of power in the SCS.

4.1. Drivers of China-US strategic rivalry

The China-US strategic rivalry is characterized by a complicated aggregation of different driving factors. It includes the following drivers:

4.1.1. Territorial dispute and maritime rules

Territorial disputes and overlapping claims are the primary factors of the China-US rivalry in the SCS. Chinese assertiveness, construction, and militarization of artificial islands raised concern among the regional states and the US. China claims almost the whole SCS on the basis of a nine-dash line while overlapping with the claims of other states. The US accentuates that Chinese claims in the SCS based on the nine-dash line are against international law and UNCLOS (Department of State, 2019). China and the US have different stances on the SCS issue as both interpret the specific articles of UNCLOS according to their own will. China defends its historical claim that it’s not mentioned in the UNCLOS what makes historic rights while on the other hand, it is clearly mentioned in the UNCLOS that “matters not regulated by this Convention continue to be governed by the rules and principles of general international law (United Nations, 1982).” However, China has adopted different approaches to the SCS dispute and focused on security and sovereignty because of its geography and political history while the US pursued it through the international principle of free navigation. This divergence led to strategic confrontation and rivalry in the SCS.

4.1.2. Military presence of China and the US in the South China Sea

Another factor that contributes to the rivalry between China and the US is the recapturing of islands and the militarization of those islands. Since 2014, China deployed various military facilities in the Spratly Islands. The US Secretary of Defense's office report claimed that Beijing occupied approximately 3200 acres of land in the SCS by 2016 through military means (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019). China strengthens various bases by deploying air missiles, antiship cruise missiles, as well as radars, hangars, and underground storage facilities. Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral John Aquilino said that over the past two decades, PRC modernized its capabilities and built up its military on a large scale. The large military buildup in the Spratly Island is a threat to all the states that operate in the domain of that marine or air space. In response, the US focused on holding military activities in the SCS such as FON operations, and military drills. They deployed four combat service groups, two amphibious ready groups, eleven SSN submarines, and twenty-two bomber stories. The US engaged regional states like the Philippines and Vietnam to be involved militarily in the SCS which further intensified the China-US rivalry in the region (SCSPI, 2022).

4.1.3. Power politics

It is a fact that the PLA is insufficient to challenge the US at the international level even in the Pacific at large and nor can disturb the balance of power which is dominated by the US. However, considerable power politics has occurred in the Pacific, particularly in the SCS. An unpopular opinion is that China's rise in the Western Pacific will lead to disturb the balance of power. China is challenging the status quo in the Pacific who dominate it for the last few decades (Hu, 2021). Apparently, the US is not willing to accept this power transition in the Asia Pacific despite the fact of changing power dynamics. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said (Shalal & Alexander, 2016):

Today's security environment is dramatically different than the one we've been engaged in for the last 25 years and it requires new ways of thinking and new ways of acting

The US strategic rivalry with Beijing has several aims but most fundamentally is to maintain its marine dominancy and regional balance of power in the SCS. On the other hand, China is strengthening its presence in the Sea through the military and enhancing its influence in the region. This tug of power politics in the region will further escalate the rivalry between the two states.

4.1.4. Third-party factors and regional alliances

The US demonstrates security to build an alliance with Manila and other ASEAN states. Over the past decade, the US increased security commitments with the regional states with respect

to Chinese assertiveness in the SCS. Unsurprisingly, China's efforts to secure maritime rights and sovereignty would be resisted by the other states: the third parties. Sometimes, the US responds to China politically, diplomatically, and militarily in conformance with its allies and partners. However, the US thinks that Beijing will use the dispute to create differences between the US and its partner which will weaken the security posture in the region (O'Rourke, 2023). This third-party factor between the two states is an important variable in their power relation. The US considers these third parties as part of its rivalry with Beijing. In a larger picture, the SCS rivalry is not about the recapturing or claims but it's about the power, dominancy, and influence in the region which is aligned with the US rule-based order.

4.1.5. Regional dynamics of the South China Sea

Regional security can be defined as a regional environment related to the security perceived by the states in the region. It means the decrement of all the states in a certain region where each actor has different opinions, capabilities, strengths, and interests (Toruan, 2021, p. 83). The SCS is strategically a significant maritime region having complex security dynamics. Its natural resources, reserves, important sea lanes, and trade routes make it a striking point for numerous security concerns. The SCS regional security dynamics are determined by various factors.

4.1.6. Territorial disputes and overlapping claims

The primary factor that shapes the regional security dynamics is the territorial disputes and overlapping claims of the claimant states in the SCS. China, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have different and somewhere overlapping territorial claims in the SCS on various geographical and historical basis. The overlapping claims over the sea have given rise to differences among the countries about their maritime rights. China claims eighty to ninety percent of SCS on the basis of a nine-dash line. Vietnam asserts its right over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, while the Philippines claims its ownership of Scarborough Shoal and Spratly. Malaysia and Brunei have claimed some of the Spratly Islands and sovereignty over southern parts of the SCS (SCMP, 2020). The disputes actually rotate around the control over the resources, island occupation, and sovereignty over the maritime territory. The overlapping claims and conflict over the SCS contribute to the tension and may have consequences for the relationship between the claimant states and regional stability. Such as the difference over the resources in the disputed areas would heighten tension between claimant states (Hideshi, 2013).

4.1.7. External involvement in the South China Sea

The SCS is one of the major hotspots in the international political environment. Some non-claimant nations consider it crucial for their national interest. The US is one of the most important states advocating the principle of free navigation in the sea. To show commitment with international law and guarantee to claimant parties in the SCS, the US conducts FONOPs

in the SCS through the navy transits. The US conducts these navigation operations to exercise the principle of freedom of the sea and ensure the use of the sea according to the principles of international law. Recently in March 2023, US warship (DDG-69) conducted FONOP around Parcel Island. Through conducting the FONOP, US challenges the China's claim around the Parcel Island as a violation of international law (Mongilio, 2023). In response to the FONOP, China's defense spokesperson protested and said (Wei, 2023).

US military has gravely violated China's sovereignty and security, as well as the international law, which is another irrefutable proof of its navigation hegemony and militarization of the South China Sea. We sternly demand the US side to immediately stop such provocative behaviors, otherwise, it would take the serious consequences of every eventuality it caused

In early 2019, the UK warship frigate HMS Argyll and USS McCampbell of the US carried out a joint operation in the SCS for a week. It includes communication drills, personal exchange, division tactics, and building navy-to-navy relations. On the other hand, Like-minded states such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, and France also conducted FONOPs in SCS. In 2018, the British Royal Navy also conducted FONOP as the HMS Albion warship entered the territorial water near Parcel Island without permission. Beijing strongly protests and warns to avoid proactive measures, as it will harm regional stability (Kelly, 2018). Additionally, the UK and France carried out joint FONOP and HMS Albion operations like the US. China warned them that it was a violation of their maritime sovereignty. These increased presences of Western navies and operations exemplified the external involvement in the SCS. The region is becoming an arena for rivalry among major powers.

4.1.8. Absence of trust and cooperation

The disagreement between states over the rights of different features and territories of the SCS led to trust issues. China wants to cooperate on the SCS bilaterally while other Claimant countries and the US want the settlement and cooperation through multilateral forums such as ASEAN (Widian & Arimadona). On the other hand, ASEAN norms and the practice of collective decision-making are the constraints to taking an extreme step on the SCS issue.

The claimant parties have trust issues that China will get more benefits if we cooperate bilaterally. Realist believes that cooperation between states is difficult in the international system even if their interests are the same (Grieco, 1988). Lack of cooperation exists because of the presumption of relative gain and fear of deception. Under this approach, states act in their own interests while ignoring the win-win upshot. The situation is the same in the SCS, proactive measures from a decade have led to a lack of cooperation and an increase in trust issues between China and calamint states, China and the US as well as within ASEAN. The proactive steps include China's occupation of land features, the Philippines' case against China

in PAC, the American strategy of countering China such as its Pivot to Asia, and the joint submission of Vietnam-Malaysia to limit the continental shelf in the SCS (Bateman, 2017).

4.1.9. Trade routes of SCS: connecting global economies and shaping regional dynamics

The strategic location and its trade routes make SCS is dynamite hub for the international trade of goods, energy, and resources between Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and America. Nealy, one-third of the international maritime trade including \$5.3 of trade, and energy vessels pass through the SCS highlights its significance. The dynamic flow of trade through SCS is paramount for the regional states and beyond. According to the last report regarding SCS published by CSIS, the value of China trade passes through SCS \$1470 billion, US-\$2080 billion, Japan-\$240 billion, Indonesia-\$239 billion, and South Korea-\$343 billion (Bateman, 2023). The continuous flow of trade stimulates economic interdependence and shapes regional dynamics in SCS.

4.2. Impacts of Sino-US strategic rivalry on the security dynamics of South China Sea

Recently, the world's strategic and economic hub and pivot shifted toward the Asia Pacific which became the focus of major power competition. The tug-of-war between major powers in the region brings uncertainties to regional security. America is focused on strengthening its military posture and security alliance while deploying its navy in the Asia Pacific which increased the complexity of regional security dynamics (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The SCS issue is considered a proxy for China-US strategic rivalry for power competition, regional trade, alliance realignment, and rebalancing. Certainly, Beijing has taken control of occupied marine and land features and militarized them while the US through its presence and naval activities intimidating but unlikely to take extreme measures to further strain the regional security environment (Lee, 2017).

4.2.1. Militarisation of the South China Sea and power projection

The SCS extensively militarized because of China-US rivalry, Chinese assertiveness, and the US naval presence and standing with the principle of free navigation. Being an assertive regional power, China occupied islands and built up militarily to prevent the US's violation of its sovereignty. The tension between China and the US and its partners has escalated in the past decade when China became more assertive in the SCS. The China-US rivalry escalates Navel activities and military build-up in the SCS. PLA Navy is the nucleus of China's military modernization and expansion program. Beijing has installed military facilities including Radar systems and airstrips on several disputed islands. China knows very well that to achieve the required strategic goal in the SCS, it is important to have a modern military capability. They included anti-ship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, submarines, destroyers, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, etc. Beijing has acquired anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) marine capability to retaliate against the US potential military

intervention in Taiwan and SCS (Fels & Li, 2016). According to the US Pacific Commander, Beijing has installed anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, jamming materials along with fighter jets, and other military facilities and equipment on Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross, and some other entities over which Vietnam claims its sovereignty. Even Beijing temporarily installed H-6K nuclear-capable bombers on Woody Island.

On the other hand, the US also increases its naval presence in response to the emerging dynamics and Chinese assertiveness. Last year, US military presence intensified excessively, which serves as a risk of maximizing hostilities in the region. China blames the US for the Spy plan activities in the surroundings of occupied islands. According to a Chinese report, the US carried out 95 different FONOPs in the year 2020. Aside from free navigation operations, China holds military exercises with other regional states to challenge Beijing's claims and aggressive posture in the SCS. In August 2021, Quad member states conducted a "Large Scale Exercise" which is considered one of the largest naval exercises in the past four decades (Xiao, 2021). In addition, the US also encourages the regional states and allies to enhance their defense and military capabilities and agitation against China.

In response to the Chinese assertive posture and militarization in the SCS, the US enhanced its defense cooperation with the claimant allies. The US has the opinion that it is obliged to support its partners against China under certain treaties. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the US and the Philippines allows the US to deploy its military and construct military facilities and bases. Recently, the Philippines allowed the US to install and construct four bases under the EDCA near the strait of Taiwan and the SCS. Military build-up in the SCS seems provocative and a source of tension between the two states (Malindog-Uy, 2023). The region has become a theater of militarization and power projection. The race for military modernization and power projection between the regional states especially between China and the US increased the risk of miscalculation and a threat to the security of the region.

4.2.2. Alliances and partnerships

The China-US rivalry instigated states to seek partnership and alliance as a track to balance the growing Chinese influence in the SCS. During President Trump's tenure, the US released an Indo-Pacific strategy and declared Beijing as a revisionist power in the SCS. As the effect of China-US rivalry, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the only informal security forum emerged. The revival of Quad serves as the backbone of that strategy, which aims to counter China and its assertiveness in the Western Pacific particularly in the SCS. Since its revival, Quad has taken a more open approach giving tough times to China in the SCS while advocating a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region. Quad focused on countering China's growing influence and assertiveness in the region. However Chinese analyst believes that quad members will not directly counter China, especially an issue like SCS because of their bilateral ties and economic interdependence but they certainly support rule-based orders in the region because of their aligned interests. At the same time, Quad member state are decreasing their dependence

on China economically, minimizing trade and enhancing security cooperation with each other and other regional states. The Quad members believe that through Quad we can compel China to reconsider its strategy as Quad is more effective and potent than ever (Hughes, 2022).

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed between the US and the Philippines which authorized access to US forces to agreed locations and bases for security exercises military training, and drills. With the increase in China's assertiveness, they renewed EDCA to Mutual Logistic Support Agreement (MLSA) to enhance military cooperation in the regional emerging security dynamics in 2017 (Department of State, 2022). In addition, the US and Vietnam security cooperation and partnership are based on mutual defense cooperation and security challenges. They held more than ten security defense and political dialogues to enhance their security cooperation. Vietnam received \$92 million in security assistance from 2017 to 2022 and \$81.5 under the FMF in 2018 (Department of Defense, 2023). The US's efforts to make an alliance and enhance partnerships aim to build its influence and counter China by providing military and non-military support which disturb the equilibrium of the regional security dynamics.

4.2.3. Shifting dynamics in the region and balance of power

Under the Trump National Security Strategy, the US declared China as a revisionist power in the SCS. China is trying to become an Asian regional power. Offensive realism argues that in the international system, the balance of power is a constant change and maximization of power. It creates power allurements for a nation to pursue opportunities and enhance its power at the expense of the opponent state. Robert Gilpin argues, "As the power of a state increases, it seeks to extend its territorial control, its political influence, and/or its domination of the international economy (Gilpin, 2010)." However, offensive realism holds that the rise of regional power would not be peaceful because it will try hard to influence and survive as a power in the region. China adopted the policy of peaceful rise but in the last decade, it became more assertive in the SCS. Adopting this posture China is certain to stand by national interest and sovereignty and strive for regional power.

Since the President Xi Era, the balance of power has shifted and started a new era of China-US rivalry between a regional power and a global hegemon. The US policies of rebalancing and Indo-Pacific strategy were mainly adopted to contain China because of the shift in the regional balance of power. It involved the military and security elements focused on countering the Chinese offensive strategy. It is crucial for the US to maintain its influence in the SCS to protect its survival as a global power. The tug of war and balancing the regional power dynamics, the claimant states are affected by their approaches toward the disputes and increasing security concerns as both powers are in the power struggle, and want to maximize their own influence, and security in the region.

4.2.4. Regional instability

Beijing tried to maintain the balance between “stability” and “protecting rights” in the SCS. The revision of China’s maritime policies increased tension in the region which affected its relationship with the regional states. Despite cordial relations with claimant states, China become more assertive in the SCS. China thinks that regional claimant states have taken advantage of Beijing’s passive posture in the past at the cost of our interest. China adopted a “dual tactics” approach to cooperate with the regional state but actively depended on the rights and its claims. The discord between the SCS claimant states evolved into strategic rivalry between China and major powers such as the US. Beijing conveys a message that the US should respect Beijing’s “core interest” in the region (Yang & Li, 2016, p. 147). On the other hand, the US clearly declared Chinese claims in the SCS unlawful. Beijing has no lawful and legal ground to impose its own will unilaterally. The US stands with the claimant allies against China’s growing influence and guarantees rule-based order and free navigation in the region. Even the US provided security and defense assistance under FOIPS to the claimant states specifically the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan (Department of Defense, 2023). China is concerned over the US support of the claimant states and intervention in the dispute through its naval presence. The US conducted regular FONOPS to challenge Beijing’s extensive claims to ensure Freedom of Navigation. However, China demanded that the US should stop intervening with the claimant states in the SCS. This hostility between the two powers has increased tension and contributed to regional instability and an uncertain security environment.

4.2.5. Arms race

Arms race refers to an action-reaction chain whereby countries increase the quality and quantity of their armaments in response to perceived threats about other states’ actual or expected military strength. The China-US increasing Strategic rivalry has added new dimensions to the existing security situation. The rivalry has contributed to the surge of the arms race, with both states trying to advance their military capabilities in the SCS. In the SCS, the neighboring states perceived a threat and rapidly expanded their military budget and arms procurement. China’s defense budget increased by 50% in the last decade from \$145 billion in 2012 to \$293.3 billion in 2021. By 2023, China will increase its defense budget by 7.2% taking it the highest peak ever (MacroTrends, 2023). China’s defense spending clearly shows its military capabilities and expansionist design. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) is a notable development in strengthening national defense and advancing the national armed forces. This defense spending is not just about the numbers but the intentions that lie hidden behind these developments (Jash, 2023).

Presently, it seems that the US is the only power that can look to China’s military modernization and supremacy over the SCS. The US also prioritized increasing and strengthening its military presence in the Asia Pacific region as the US considered China the only competitor and threat to its hegemonic role in the region. In this regard, the United States

provides defense support to claimant states particularly to Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam to counter or address the growing influence and assertiveness of China in the SCS. In the past decade, military spending in Southeast Asia grew by 57 percent. The massive increases in the region's defense budgets are particularly impressive in absolute terms. The Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam doubled their defense budgets during the past decade. Thailand also greatly increased its military spending during the same period. One of the main reasons for the increase in military spending of Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines is their increasing concern about China's aggressive and assertive behavior, which poses a threat to their territorial claims (Heiduk, 2017). On the other hand, it is also a fact that the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam are not striving to match or surpass China or each other in an arms race and military spending. Their main objective is "minimal deterrence" in the South China Sea. This means they aim to have enough military capability to make potential aggressors think twice before attacking them.

4.2.6. Enhancing national security: risk of accidental escalation

With the increase in military activities, FON operations, and tension in the SCS, the risk of accidental escalation has increased. Beijing seems committed regarding its national security as President Xi has the intention to resolve the SCS issue in his tenure. To ensure its sovereignty over the SCS, China can take military actions on a small scale. China's control over the SCS would be a threat to throw the US from the region. Thwarting Beijing from doing so is the objective of the US national security strategy (Mastro, 2020). On the other hand, the Philippines has signed EDCA with the US to enhance its national security in the region against Chinese assertiveness. The claimant states specifically Vietnam and the Philippines including the US are at risk of accidental escalation in the region. The enhancement of the national security from the claimant states and the US complicated the security dynamics of the SCS. Any unintended move or close encounter can abruptly escalate tension and lead to drastic consequences.

5. Conclusion

The territorial disputes, overlapping claims, and the issue of sovereignty over the disputed islands in the SCS carry important ramifications for the economic and political interests, regional security, and utilization of sealines within the area. The overlapping claims in the SCS are the subject of controversy between the claimant states and major world powers such as the US and China. China-US rivalry is heightened by China's assertiveness and the US's proactive approach in the SCS to counter and contain China. The rivalry was further intensified by various factors such as maritime disputes, military presence, alliances, and power politics. China and the US have different stances on the SCS issue as both interpret the specific articles of UNCLOS according to their own will and wishes. The US wants to maintain the rule-based order to maintain its superiority and confine the Chinese rise. The quest for superiority, and struggle for influence led to the China-US strategic rivalry in the SCS. The China-US rivalry

has a transcendent impact on the security dynamic in the SCS. The tortuous interconnection of territorial conflict, major power involvement, absence of trust and cooperation, maritime security and trade routes has heightened tension and increased security risk in the region. This divergence has heightened tensions and led to the massive militarization of the SCS. China has built various bases and deployed air missiles, antiship cruise missiles, radars, hangars, and underground storage facilities in the Spratly Islands.

The China-US rivalry has largely militarized the SCS and maximized arms race which raised regional security concerns for accidental or intended clashes. The race of military buildup and power projection among the claimant states and two major powers China and the US in the SCS agitates regional peace and security. Due to this power play, the regional balance of power is at risk. The approaches of both powers affected the other claimant states while balancing the regional dynamics. The US trying to counter the Chinese offensiveness through military means and alliance tactics. The US has strengthened security cooperation with the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia and enhanced its military presence. While on the other hand, China pursued economic engagement with these states but committed to its claims in the SCS. It further complicated the security dynamics as China wanted to create a balance between regional stability and protecting her claims in the SCS. In response the US clearly stated that China's claims are unlawful and stand with the other claimant states against China. The persuasion of national security in the SCS increased the instability. China and other claimant states are trying to enhance national security and safeguard their claims in the SCS through different means while the US wants to counter Chinese expansionist design in the region which significantly impacted the security dynamics and regional peace.

The findings carried out transcendent impacts on China-US rivalry on the regional security dynamic in the SCS. The territorial conflict, major power involvement, absence of trust and cooperation, maritime security, and trade routes shaped the regional security dynamics of the SCS. The territorial dispute and overlapping claims include China's claims on the basis of the nine-dash line, Vietnam's claims over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and the Philippines' claims on the ownership of Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Island. Malaysia and Brunei have claims over some of the Spratly Islands, and sovereignty over southern parts of the SCS contributes to the complexity of the security dynamics. The dispute among the claimant states over the larger part of the sea attracts major powers like the US, Japan, and Australia to pursue their interests in the region. The US advocates the principle of free seas and supports the small claimant states against the assertive power of China. To uphold the principles of the law of the seas, the US conducts FONOPs in the SCS through the Navy transits. UK and France are also carrying out FONOPs in the sea, which China considers a violation of its territorial sovereignty. The involvement of international players in the SCS is due to its sea lines and high oil, natural gas, fish, and dynamite reserves. The continuous flow of trade galvanizes economic interdependence. These factors collectively shape the regional security dynamics in the SCS.

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