

**WHEN THE COMPLACENT GIANT STIRS:
Revisiting Hegemonic Behavior During Instability in the Global World Order**

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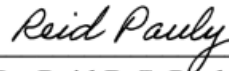
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ABSTRACT

To what extent does hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas change during times of instability in the global world order? The United States has sought to preserve its relative power advantage against China for twenty years, but its policies towards peripheral areas break with existing scholarship. Current explanations—foundational international relations theories, hegemonic order theory, and brinkmanship—predict aggressive behavior from the hegemon towards the rising power and even preemptive war. I argue that hegemonic behavior instead manifests as competition for allies and relative strategic influence. An examination of U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea from 2000 to 2023 reveals the threat of nuclear war mitigates international conflict; hegemons are initially complacent and reactive in peripheral areas and only become proactive when they perceive the rising power to have achieved parity. Using twenty years of quantitative data on U.S. activity, key U.S. policy documents, and interviews with subject matter experts, I test four theories of hegemonic behavior and synthesize them into a new framework. Different theories have explanatory power for hegemonic behavior during different policy phases. My study has implications for the U.S.-China relations, interstate competition, global stability, and research on international relations more broadly.

Keywords: China, hegemon, rising power, peripheral, brinkmanship

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I was in Beijing from 2009 to 2012 and during that era, Washington had the perspective that if we could invite China into the international order, that the things we didn't like about China, everything from human rights to its business practices to its corruption, would change. We thought we could change China...The fact of the matter is the exact opposite has happened. They have welcomed themselves into this order, and then have actually, in some cases, worked against some of its areas to try to advance their own interests.

— Director Christopher Sharman, April 2, 2024

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
ASEAN	The Association of South East Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States Trilateral Security Partnership for the Indo-Pacific
DoD	Department of Defense
DoS	Department of State
EDCA	Enhanced Cooperation Defense Agreement
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
FONOPs	Freedom of Navigation Operations
HST	Hegemonic Stability Theory
LWO	Liberal World Order
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Philippines
MTA	Military Training Activity
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's liberation Army Navy
PTT	Power Transition Theory
SCS	South China Sea
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
WTO	World Trade Organization

CHAPTER 1

INSTABILITY IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

Looking at the world at the end of the twentieth century, one could be excused for thinking that history was moving in a progressive and liberal internationalist direction. Today, this liberal international order is in crisis.

— G. John Ikenberry, “The End of liberal International order?”
International Affairs

Despite predictions that the end of the Cold War heralded the ultimate victory of western liberal democracy¹ and the beginning of a liberal world order of democratic states,² the modern world is instead witnessing a period of instability in the global world order.³ The rise of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China or the PRC) as a significant military and economic power, and the rise of the right and authoritarian leaning regimes around the world,⁴ has shattered the belief that the natural process of state development leads to democracy.⁵ Additionally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and China’s aggressive threats towards the Republic of China (hereafter Taiwan) seem to indicate the influence of the Liberal World Order (LWO) on state

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18. 3-4.

² G. John Ikenberry, “Power and liberal order: America’s postwar world order in transition”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 5 (2), 2005, 133–152, 1.

³ By global world order, I am referring to Mearsheimer’s definition in “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order”, where a global order is defined as “an organized group of international institutions that help govern the interactions among the member states”. Orders can comprise institutions that have a regional or a global scope.

⁴ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

⁵ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy: China’s Rise and the Future of Global Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (2019): 92–102, 95.

behavior is in decline. All of these shifts in the post-WWII global order have led some experts⁶ to herald the destabilization of American Hegemony and the end of the era of the U.S.-established Liberal World Order. This order is defined by John J. Mearsheimer as “a world order consisting exclusively of liberal democracies⁷ that are economically engaged with each other and bound together by sets of common rules,...[that is] largely free of war and will generate prosperity for all of its member states.”⁸

If these predictions are correct and there are rising challenges to the Liberal World Order, the resulting instability will cause problems on a global scale. Hegemonic order theory indicates that without a hegemon, the international economy governed by the idea of free and fair markets will collapse. There will be breakdowns in international security, and a decrease in the ideals protected by the Liberal World Order, such as support for open markets and the expansion of

⁶ For some examples, see G. John Ikenberry, “Power and liberal order: America's postwar world order in transition”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 5, Issue 2 (2005): 133–152; Nana de Graaff, Tobias ten Brink, and Inderjeet Parmar, “China’s Rise in a Liberal World Order in Transition - Introduction to the FORUM,” *Review of International Political Economy* : RIPE 27, no. 2 (2020): 191–207; Alexander Kentikelenis and Erik Voeten, “Legitimacy Challenges to the Liberal World Order: Evidence from United Nations Speeches, 1970–2018”, *Review of International Organizations* 16, no. 4 (2021): 721–754; Johnson Singh Chandam, “Western Populism and Liberal Order: A Reflection on ‘Structural Liberalism’ and the Resilience of Western Liberal Order,” *International Relations*, (2022): 1-22.

⁷ By liberal democracy, I refer to Freedom House’s definition of “a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights. It is a network of mutually reinforcing structures in which those exercising power are subject to checks both within and outside the state...requires an openness to alternations in power, with rival candidates or parties competing fairly to govern for the good of the public as a whole...It creates a level playing field so that all people, no matter the circumstances of their birth or background, can enjoy the universal human rights to which they are entitled and participate in politics and governance.”

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 2019; 43 (4): 7–50, 14.

democracy.⁹ Therefore, it is important to understand why the Liberal World Order is under threat and how various actors have sought to either challenge or preserve it.

Currently, many scholars claim that the United States is the giant of the international system, and the reigning, if diminishing, hegemon of the global world order.¹⁰ Through this position, the United States has maintained the Liberal World Order for the last twenty years. Meanwhile, the rise of China and its continued rule by the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹¹ represents the most significant challenge towards U.S. hegemony.¹² Although U.S. leaders and experts hoped that Deng Xiaoping's policy of "Reform and Opening" (*gaige kaifang*, 改革开放) and China's resulting exposure to the international system and western influence would liberalize China, the PRC has instead sought to challenge the U.S. led world-order to

⁹ Jelena Belic and Zoltan Miklosi, "Cosmopolitanism and Unipolarity: The Theory of Hegemonic Transition," *Critical review of international social and political philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2023): 181–203, 185; G. John Ikenberry, "Power and liberal order: America's postwar world order in transition," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2005, Pages 133–152, 139; Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtvr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoln6o/edit?usp=sharing>; James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jPlMfGEJHTVgw9pGhDv1RMaw5fWg_m428nbmXJM3Pfw/edit?usp=sharing.

¹⁰ John Ikenberry, "Power and Liberal Order: America's Postwar World Order in Transition", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5, no. 1 (2005): 133–52; John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 2019; 43 (4): 7–50; Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann. "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European journal of international relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

¹¹ Yuen Yuen Ang, "How Resilient Is the CCP?", *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (July 2022): 77–91.

¹² Suisheng Zhao, "The US-China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance," *The Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 169–185, 169. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/cooperate-compete-confront-or-conflict-comparing-china-components-national-security-strategies-trump>.

secure its own regime.¹³ This is a previously unprecedented international situation that scholars, like G. John Ikenberry, argue has not occurred since the fall of the Roman Empire.¹⁴

Despite China's challenge to the Liberal World Order, U.S. policy towards China has not followed the predictions of existing theories of international relations and hegemonic behavior, especially in peripheral areas. The term "peripheral areas" refers to issue areas where the United States is willing to invest funds, but not necessarily willing to invest U.S. forces to fight or die for.¹⁵ As of 2024, the U.S. has not launched a preemptive war against China,¹⁶ nor has it ceded its preponderate position in the global world order.¹⁷ Instead, the United States has been largely complacent in its treatment of China and mainly tried to use existing structures to subsume China into the global world order. The threat of China and its intentions towards the Liberal World Order has only recently stirred the United States into action. This action mainly involves contesting China in areas that were previously peripheral to its interests, leading to the question:

¹³ Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy: China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics", *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (2019): 92–102, 95; Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, "China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty: Past Accomplishments and Emerging Challenges" in *To Get Rich Is Glorious: Challenges Facing China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press (2019); Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), April 2, 2024.

¹⁴ John Ikenberry, "Power and Liberal Order: America's Postwar World Order in Transition", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5, no. 1 (2005): 133–52, 149.

¹⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, I use the definitions for "vital interests," "important interests," and "peripheral interests" provided in Joint Doctrine Note 1-18 (JDN 1-18). Vital interests are defined as "interests we [the United States] are willing to die for?" JDN 1-18 explains that, "states generally have four vital interests: security of the home territory, safety of citizens at home and abroad, economic prosperity, and preservation of the national way of life." JDN-18 defines "important interests" as "what are we [the United States] willing to fight for?" and says that "nations important interests generally include freedom of access to the global commons, regional stability, secure alliances, or the promotion of the state's values." Finally, "peripheral interests" are defined as "what are we [the United States] willing to fund" but not die or fight for. For more information see: https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_ig/jdn1_18.pdf.

¹⁶ As predicted by offensive realism, such as predictions in Christopher Layne, "The "Poster Child for Offensive Realism": America as a global hegemon," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 130.

¹⁷ As predicted by Power Transition Theory, such as A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1958).

How did the United States change its policy in peripheral areas towards China from 2000-September 2023?

This study seeks to explain this break in actual, observable policy from what existing theory would predict by testing theories of offensive realism, structural liberalism, hegemonic order, and brinkmanship and synthesizing them into a theoretical framework to explain the changes in the United States' policy towards China in peripheral areas from 2000-2023. By using this framework to examine the motivating factors behind the United States' policy towards China in areas that appear to have been previously peripheral interests, this thesis will help answer a larger question as well: to what extent does hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas change during times of instability in the global world order?

I argue that from 2000 to September 2023 the United States shifted its policy from one best explained by liberalism to one dominated by power dynamics and interstate competition best described by hegemonic order theory and brinkmanship. I also claim this transition coincided with the United States shifting from being complacent and reactive towards China in these peripheral areas to being proactive. I argue that both these overarching shifts resulted from a change in the United States' perception of China's power and threat to U.S. interests. However, the United States' policy response to Chinese behavior was mitigated by these both actors possessing nuclear weapons. The central tenets of this argument are outlined in figure 1.1, which extrapolates this change in U.S. policy from the level of perception, to generalizable theory, then to the case for this study.

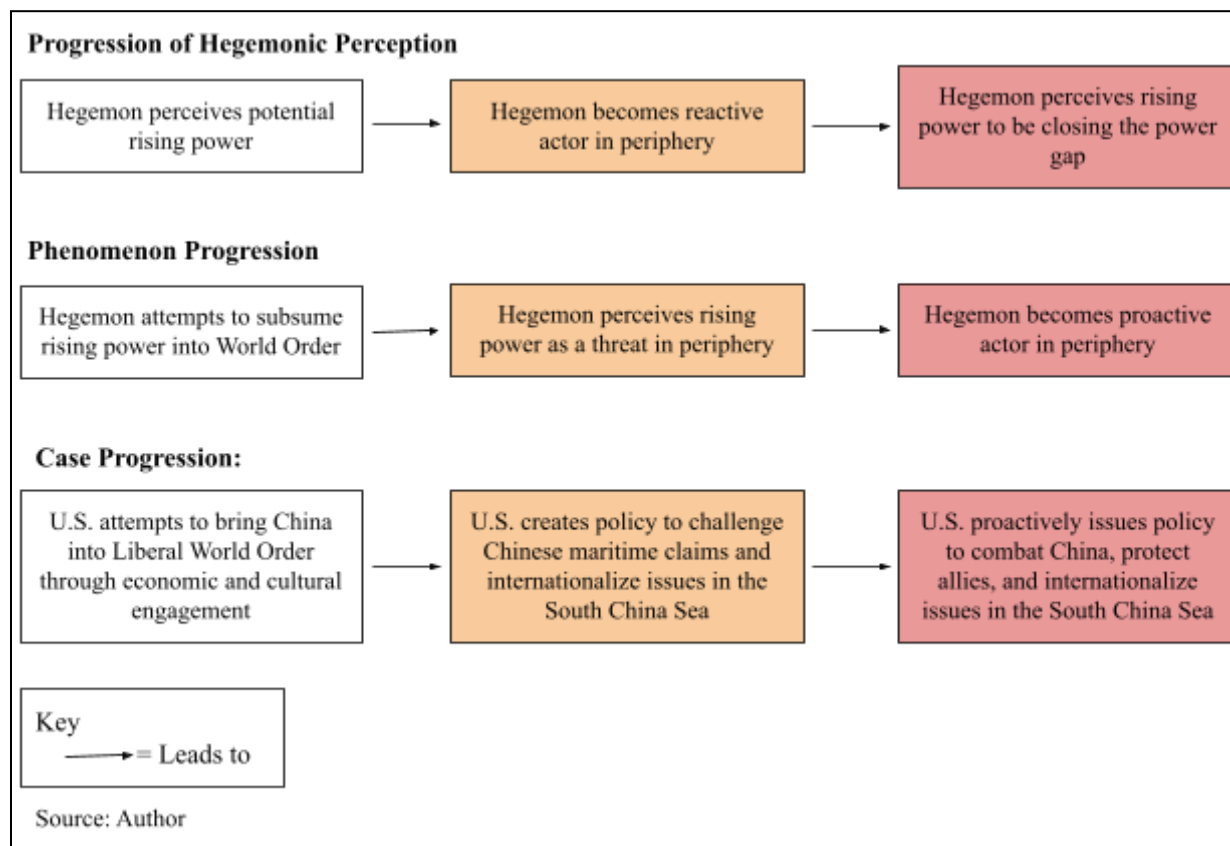
During the 2000s, China experienced a period of rapid economic growth that went largely unhindered by the 2008 Great Recession.¹⁸ This economic growth allowed China to begin

¹⁸ Yi Wen and Scott Wolla, "China's Rapid Economic Rise: A New Application of an Old Recipe," *Social Education* 81, no. 2 (2017): 93-97.

investing in military modernization and expansion.¹⁹ U.S. leaders perceived this growth in China's military and economic power as a sign that China could pose a potential threat to U.S. interests and the Liberal World Order. This then led the United States to try to incorporate China into the existing world order. However, when the United States perceived that China was growing more powerful and continuing to challenge parts of the Liberal World Order in peripheral areas, it adopted a more reactive role against China to attempt to shore up the LWO. Finally, when the U.S. perceived China to be closing the power gap and posing a genuine challenge to the U.S. led Liberal World Order, the United States then adopted a more proactive role vis-a-vis China in peripheral areas.

¹⁹ Jim Garamone, "DOD Report Details Chinese Efforts to Build Military Power," U.S. Department of Defense, October 19, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3562442/dod-report-details-chinese-efforts-to-build-military-power/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20report%2C%20Chinese,joint%20training%2C%20the%20official%20said.>

Figure 1.1: Outline of Argument



The word “perception” is used throughout this argument because as Robert Jervis and Reid B.C. Pauly, and Rose McDermott point out, perception plays an important role in a leader’s decision making process. How leaders perceive others’ interests, signals, and willingness to escalate a situation, combined with how they perceive their own rationality, can lead to escalation or even conflict.²⁰ Based on this argument, the United States’ perception of China’s power and capabilities is just as important as China’s actual power and intentions towards the international system. This concept of perception will be expanded in my literature review.

²⁰ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship”, *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 20. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 201.

SIGNIFICANCE

There are both theoretical and practical reasons to undertake this study. First, foundational international relations theories, scholarship on hegemony, and brinkmanship literature all have significant weaknesses that prevent them from providing a comprehensive analysis of hegemonic behavior and its role in international relations. Therefore, these theories need to be tested to see if they can explain hegemonic behavior during shifts in the global world order. Furthermore, since these gaps exist, the applicable theories also need to be combined into a new framework for analyzing hegemonic behavior. My thesis aims to contribute to the literature by completing both these necessary tasks. This study also has practical implications, as my framework will help policy makers better understand and avoid inefficient trends in hegemonic behavior, better analyze their perceived interests, and ultimately avoid interstate conflict.

CONCEPTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

This thesis situates itself in three significant bodies of literature: the foundational international relations theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, hegemonic order theory, and the strategy of brinkmanship.

Foundational international relations theories provide broad paradigms through which scholars can approach international relations. Realism is a paradigm that emphasizes the role of material power in international relations, and is based in the works of philosophers like Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes.²¹ Important sub-variants of realism include neorealism based in

²¹ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 20-24.

the work of Kenneth Waltz,²² and offensive realism associated with the writings of John Mearsheimer.²³ Liberalism, in contrast, emphasizes the role of structures and processes of international cooperation. It also analyzes the role of international organizations and non-state actors in shaping state interests and actions.²⁴ Liberalism is also often cited as possessing an economic bent that emphasizes the importance of economic interdependence in interstate politics.²⁵ Important liberal sub-groups include neoliberalism, based in the work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye,²⁶ as well as structural liberalism, created by Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry.²⁷ Finally, Constructivism is a paradigm about ideas that argues the social world is constructed, therefore interpreting meaning and examining changing practices, norms, and identities is important in international relations.²⁸ Constructivism is a broad and varied paradigm, but notable constructivist scholars include Nicholas Onuf,²⁹ Friedrich Kratochwil,³⁰ Alexander

²²Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 29. Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 16-17.

²³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 32-34..

²⁴ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 46-47.

²⁵ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 66.

²⁶ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 47-48; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence Revisited," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): 725-753, 737-738.

²⁷ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179-96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 179.

²⁸ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (1989); Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-4.

²⁹ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

³⁰ Frederick Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989), 10-12; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

Wendt,³¹ Nina Tannenwald,³² and Kishore Mahbubani.³³ Although these fundamental international relations theories provide important foundations and approaches for analyzing hegemony's role in international relations, each fails to completely explain the specific dynamics that accompany hegemonic behavior. Realism's emphasis on power neglects important factors such as state intentions, while liberalism's predictions often struggle to be generalizable outside of the experience of developed countries and overemphasize the mitigating role of institutions on international relations. Finally Constructivism is such a broad paradigm that it does not provide enough guide posts to produce an in-depth analysis of hegemonic behavior.

Hegemonic order theory explains both stability and instability in the international system through its two main theoretical mechanisms: hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory.³⁴ This body of literature argues that the existence of a hegemon as a single, leading actor creates international stability. It also explains changes in state behavior during periods of power transitions, such as uncertainty in the international hierarchy generating increasingly assertive behavior by other great powers.³⁵ However, as highlighted in figure 1.2, literature on hegemonic stability focuses mainly on the hegemon's effect on the international system, and the actions of dissatisfied rising powers within that system. There is limited literature on how the hegemon itself will behave when its position is challenged and how it can compete with the rising power

³¹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

³² Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

³³ Kishore Mahbubani, *The Asian 21st Century* (Singapore: Springer Nature 2022).

³⁴ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann. "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account." *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

³⁵ G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon. "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders." *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 396.

short of preemptive war. This gap means there is an entire side of the hegemon-rising power dynamic that has yet to be comprehensively analyzed, impairing the predictive abilities of existing theory.

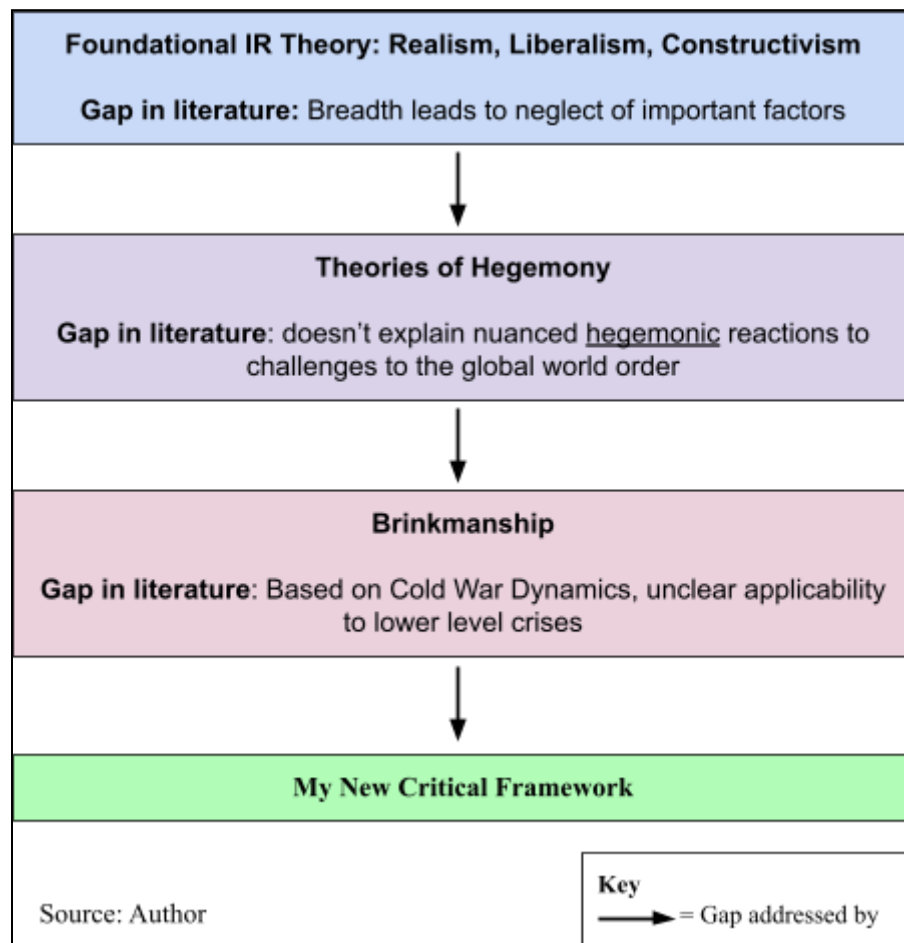
Finally, this study employs a new analytical tool for understanding hegemonic behavior by examining U.S. policy towards the South China Sea through brinkmanship, or the threat that leaves something to chance. Unlike the other bodies of literature used in this study, brinkmanship is a strategy of nuclear coercion rather than a predictive theory, meaning it can be used to analyze and explain U.S. policy choices in the South China Sea rather than explain the causes of that behavior. Brinkmanship was proposed by Thomas Schelling in 1959, and is commonly defined as “a competition in risk-taking or manipulating the chance of mutual disaster.”³⁶ This theory contains bodies of literature on escalation, risk manipulation, and psychology, making it a solid lens through which to examine U.S policy towards China.

However, most literature on brinkmanship is heavily influenced by Cold War dynamics, with many authors basing their analysis of brinkmanship on the Cuban Missile Crisis.³⁷ It is important to adjust brinkmanship to accommodate contemporary dynamics, and examine whether a conventional conflict can act as a brink under the right circumstances. As demonstrated in figure 1.2, my testing of these existing theories and development of a new framework helps fill these gaps in the literature, and develops a new way for scholars to understand hegemony and its role in the international system.

³⁶ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship”, *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 15.

³⁷ For some examples see: Stephen J. Cimbala, “Behaviour Modification and the Cuban Missile Crisis: From Brinkmanship to Disaster Avoidance,” *Arms Control* 13, no. 2 (1992): 252-284; Alice L. George, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: the Threshold of Nuclear War*, New York: Routledge, 2013; Avinash K. Dixit, David McAdams, and Susan Skeath, “We Haven’t Got But One More Day’: The Cuban Missile Crisis as a Dynamic Chicken Game,” *SSRN* (2019).

Figure 1.2: Model of Conceptual Significance



PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This study holds important implications for how challenges to the global world order can cause a hegemon to change how they perceive and approach peripheral areas. Without an understanding of how competition between a hegemon and rising power influences hegemonic reactivity, such competition could lead policymakers falling into trends of hegemonic complacency that hurt their state's vital interests, such as allies perceiving hegemonic complacency as a lack of commitment and breaking ties with the hegemon. Additionally, over prioritization of areas where the hegemon has no vital interests due to misperception could lead to hegemonic overextension, misallocation of resources, and damage to the hegemon's interests

in other vital regions. Additionally, hegemonic overcommitment to an area that appears peripheral to its interests could cause the rising power to believe the hegemon has aggressive intentions towards it, leading to escalation and unnecessary conflict. Therefore, this thesis will help policymakers better examine the underlying dynamics of foreign policy, escape damaging trends of complacent behavior, better understand their state's foreign policy interests, and ultimately avoid unnecessary conflict.

In terms of the U.S. and China, this study will help policymakers grasp how the dynamics of interstate competition affect their approach to policy. I suggest two strategies for how U.S. policymakers can more proactively protect U.S. interests. This thesis will also provide policy makers with tools to interrogate their perceptions of “peripheral” versus “vital areas,” and examine their policies and motivations for intervening in a given region. Often during great power competition, proximal issues take on an outsized importance because of their connection to broader dynamics. Many issues have fallen victim to this trend in terms of U.S.-China relations, leading both countries to take increasingly firm and inflexible stances over small issues, such as maritime features in the South China Sea.³⁸ However, by interrogating these dynamics and providing a framework to examine hegemonic behavior, this thesis will help policymakers carefully examine their motivations for engaging in competitive policies in peripheral regions to ensure that they are not just being dragged into different arenas of great power competition.

³⁸ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, Providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoln6o/edit?usp=sharing>.

RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH METHOD JUSTIFICATION

This thesis seeks to explain changes in the United States' policy towards China in peripheral areas over a twenty year period. Based on an analysis of U.S. policy during this timeframe, I synthesize existing theories into a framework for analyzing changes in hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global world order. My research questions are too large and complex to adequately explore on a global scale, especially since the 2000s witnessed changes in many different political, economic, and social spheres. Therefore, this thesis examines specific actors, in a limited area, and over a set amount of time to properly identify and examine factors that have influenced the United States' policy towards China. This study calls for a case study approach. As Charles Lipson says, "case studies are detailed investigations of individual events, actors, and relationships. They develop in-depth data on a single event or actor, or at most, a few of them,"³⁹ which makes it the ideal approach for a research project examining the factors driving changes in U.S. policy towards China. Additionally, since many changes in U.S. policy are not quantifiable variables, a qualitative case study will be able to provide more in-depth, rich, and useful evidence than a large statistical survey.

Similarly, although history must be taken into account when analyzing the relationship between the U.S. and China, this thesis is mainly focused on ongoing, contemporary trends. The United States' policy towards China, and their relationship, changes frequently, so a thorough study of this phenomenon cannot be limited to a historical analysis and must include direct observations of the current situation, interviews with experts and stakeholders, and analysis of the most current research on the topic. These research needs show that this thesis has all the

³⁹ Charles Lipson, "How to Use Case Studies Effectively" In *How to Write a BA Thesis*, 113–26, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2005, 114.

conditions to make a case study approach necessary: it has a research questions that “deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence,”⁴⁰ and is examining contemporary events that cannot be manipulated or replicated in a laboratory.⁴¹

Case Selection Justification

This study examines two phenomena: changes in hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas during shifts in the global world order and changes in U.S. policy towards China over the last twenty years. In order to explain these changes, I will examine the case of the United States’ policy towards China in the South China Sea (SCS) from 2000 to September 2023. This case was selected for five reasons.

First, this case contains several key U.S. interests, such as ally commitments, freedom of navigation, and free movement of international goods.⁴² Second, this case resembles other current situations of U.S. policy concern, and can be used to explain U.S. behavior in other similar areas.⁴³ Third, changes in the United States’ policy towards the South China Sea aligns temporally with broader changes in U.S. attitudes and global policies towards China. This temporal alignment means that observations and analysis of this case can be applied to U.S. policy towards China on a larger scale. Fourth, this case of U.S. policy in the South China Sea is an outlier case in terms of existing theory, which makes it the ideal case to test a new theoretical

⁴⁰ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed, Vol. 5, Applied Social Research Method Series, (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 6.

⁴¹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed, Vol. 5, Applied Social Research Method Series, (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 7.

⁴² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 7.

⁴³ Stephen Van Evera, “What are Case Studies? How Should They Be Performed?” In *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* 49-88, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1997, 83.

framework. Stephen Van Evera defines an outlier case as one that is “poorly explained by existing theories, on the assumption that unknown causes explain their outcomes and can be identified by examining the case.”⁴⁴ There is a fundamental question that arises when examining U.S. policy in the South China Sea: Why is the United States here? No theory adequately answers that question. However, an examination of this case through the framework of unstable hegemony can finally help answer that question. Fifth, the South China Sea is an ideal case study because U.S. policy in the South China Sea represents a hard case for applying a new framework for understanding U.S. policy.⁴⁵ It is not the main area of strategic competition with China, but is an arena of great power competition because of its relation to issues like Taiwan and overall U.S.-China competition.⁴⁶

Taiwan would have been an easier case for a study of confrontation between the U.S and China. However Taiwan has a unique and historically specific relationship with the United States, and its status as a contested zone among great powers makes it a difficult case to draw policy generalizations from. Additionally, since this thesis seeks to examine changes in hegemonic behavior in the periphery, examining U.S. policy towards China over the issue of Taiwan would not help fill that gap in the literature because U.S.-China confrontation over Taiwan is a well-studied dynamic.⁴⁷ Studying Taiwan would also not help fill a gap in

⁴⁴ Stephen Van Evera, “What are Case Studies? How Should They Be Performed?” In *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* 49-88, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1997, 86.

⁴⁵ Charles Lipson, “How to Use Case Studies Effectively” In *How to Write a BA Thesis*, 113–26, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2005, 123.

⁴⁶ See: Luke P. Bellocchi, “The Strategic Importance of Taiwan to the United States and Its Allies: Part Two – Policy since the Start of the Russia-Ukraine War,” *Parameters* 53, no. 3 (2023), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3241; Kwang Kyu Nam, “U.S. Strategy and Role in Cross-Strait Relations: Focusing on U.S.-Taiwan Relations,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2020): 155–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45441015>; <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>.

⁴⁷ For example, see Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Can China Take Taiwan? Why No One Really Knows,” *Foreign Policy at Brookings* (August 2022). <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Can-China-Take-Taiwan-v5.pdf>; Romi Jain, “Taiwan

brinkmanship literature specifically because the various conflicts over Taiwan have already been analyzed for signs of brinkmanship.⁴⁸ Since scholars have already argued that the U.S. has, and will, engage in brinkmanship over Taiwan, choosing a different case helps avoid case-selection bias. In contrast, the South China Sea is an area where many of the United States' declared interests are present and if my framework can comprehensively explain changes in hegemonic behavior during times of shifts in the global world in this hard case, then my framework will likely be useful for analyzing different cases of changing hegemonic behavior as well.

Timeframe Rationale

Several authors have denoted 2010 as a significant tipping point in the United States' policy towards the South China Sea.⁴⁹ In 2010 the U.S. began to break its previous neutrality towards the South China Sea when then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): "The United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea."⁵⁰ After 2010, the United States slowly began engaging in much more active

Conundrum in US-China Relations," *India Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2007): 168–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45073209>; Kenneth Lieberthal, "Preventing a War over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2005): 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20034275>.

⁴⁸ For some examples of literature on brinkmanship in the Second Taiwan Crisis see: Morton H. Halperin, "The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1966; Tsou, Tang, "The Quemoy Imbroglio: Chiang Kai-Shek and the United States," *The Western Political Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1959): 1075–91; For an example of literature on Brinkmanship during the Third Taiwan Crisis see: Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 87–123.

⁴⁹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 454; Jian Yang, "Navigating the Volatile South China Sea," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 5 (2011): 2–6. These authors denote 2010 as the start of U.S. intervention in the South China Sea.

⁵⁰ Jian Yang, "Navigating the Volatile South China Sea," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 5 (2011): 2–6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45236133>, 6.

behavior, such as increasing freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.⁵¹ Additionally, the increase in active U.S. behavior and interests in the South China Sea appear to align with a larger period of shifting U.S. perception regarding China from 2008 to 2023. This shift began with the Obama Administration's "rebalance to Asia," developed from 2009 to 2012. This rebalance saw the United States shift diplomatic and military resources from other regions, such as the Middle East, to Asia,⁵² and culminated in a complete change in U.S. attitudes towards China by 2023. The Obama Administration's 2010 National Security Strategy claimed to desire "a positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China,"⁵³ but according to Taylor Fravel and Charles Glaser the U.S. 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy describes China as a threatening

⁵¹ David Larter, "In Challenging China's Claims in the South China Sea, the US Navy Is Getting More Assertive," *Defense News*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/02/05/in-challenging-chinas-claims-in-the-south-china-sea-the-us-navy-is-getting-more-assertive/>; John Power, "US Patrols in South China Sea Hit Record High in 2019," *South China Morning Post*, February 15, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3048967/us-freedom-navigation-patrols-south-china-sea-hit-record-high>; "7th Fleet Cruiser Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea," United States Navy, November 28, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3229970/7th-fleet-cruiser-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-south-china-sea/>; "7th Fleet Destroyer conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea," United States Navy, January 20, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2904862/7th-fleet-destroyer-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-south-china-sea/>; "7th Fleet Cruiser Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea," United States Navy, September 8, 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2766828/7th-fleet-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-south-china-sea/>; "7th Fleet Cruiser Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea," United States Navy, July 12, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2690226/7th-fleet-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-south-china-sea/>; "7th Fleet Destroyer conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea," United States Navy, February 16, 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2505124/7th-fleet-destroyer-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-south-china-sea/>; Nicholas Huynh, "U.S. Navy, Royal Australian Navy Team up in South China Sea," United States Navy, April 22, 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2283725/us-navy-royal-australian-navy-team-up-in-south-china-sea/>; "Dual Carrier Strike Groups Reinforce U.S. Commitment to Freedom," United States Navy, July 4, 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2284320/dual-carrier-strike-groups-reinforce-us-commitment-to-freedom/>.

⁵² Janine Davidson, "The U.S. 'Pivot to Asia,'" *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (2014): 77–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44289339>.

⁵³ Barack Obama, "National Security Strategy", The White House, May 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf. 43.

power aiming to expand its influence in the Pacific and around the globe.⁵⁴ This shift in rhetoric clearly shows a significant change in the United States' perception of China's actions and intentions.

However, since my thesis is interested in examining change, it is important to establish what the United States' policy regarding the South China Sea, and China more broadly, were before 2010. Therefore, lengthening this study's time frame to twenty years to encompass both the pre-2010 status quo and the post-2010 period of transformation will allow me to establish the status quo and then demonstrate how and why that status quo changed. Additionally, increasing this time frame is important because some of the factors that led to the notable shift in 2010 occurred in the late 2000s.

Methodology

My study uses a four step process combined with interviews with subject matter experts and limited examination of Chinese language sources to test the applicability of existing theories, and develop a new framework for analyzing hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global world order. The initial three step process proceeds as follows. First, I chose five quantitative markers of U.S. behavior in the South China Sea across my time period. These markers are related to United States freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, U.S. bilateral and multilateral exercises in the South China Sea, and U.S. foreign military financing (FMF) to the Philippines. I selected these markers because they provide consistent information on manifestations of U.S. policy, as well as methods to assess U.S. interest and commitment to the South China Sea, over my entire timeframe.

⁵⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, Charles L. Glaser. "How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?" *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022): 88–134. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00443, 88.

Second, I identify and describe seven U.S. policy documents towards the South China Sea from January of 2000 to September of 2023. By examining these major U.S. policy documents, I show how U.S. policy was formulated at the beginning of this period and demonstrate how it changed as China rose in power and began challenging the U.S-led Liberal World Order. This step is also one of the major areas where I incorporate evidence from my interviews with subject matter experts to support and enhance my own analysis of these policy documents. These interviews were conducted with subject matter experts to better understand U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea, U.S-China relations, and U.S. approaches to the problem of China in the South China Sea. I conducted, recorded, and transcribed ten interviews via phone and zoom, and one via email correspondence. Interviewees included former-policymakers, military experts, U.S-China relations-focused scholars, and China-focused scholars. The information from these interviews was not only used to provide analysis for my qualitative and quantitative data, but was also used as a valuable source for my historical chapter. Finally, these interviews were used as supporting evidence for my theory testing conducted in chapter five.

Third, I test the current theoretical explanations from my literature review to see if they adequately explain U.S. policy and behavior towards China in the South China Sea. I generate counterfactual predictions for the South China Sea based on these theories, and determine if these predictions accurately explain U.S. policy for each of my three periods, and then for my timeframe overall. A blank version of the table I use to track these theories across my three time periods is shown in table 1.1. It includes the most applicable theories for examining hegemonic behavior: offensive realism, structural liberalism, hegemonic order theory, and brinkmanship. Why I chose these theories will be further explained in chapter 2.

Table 1.1: Model of Testing Table

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism				
Structural Liberalism				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ◐=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Fourth, I explain my findings and how they can be combined into an analytical framework to explain hegemonic behavior during unstable periods in the global world order.

Limitations

There are several limitations to a study of U.S. policy in the South China Sea. The first is the limited quantitative data available for U.S. actions and behavior in the South China Sea. For example there were gaps in the quantitative data for numbers of FONOPs, U.S-challenged SCS claims, and forces involved in Exercise Balikatan. These gaps are generally clustered in my first period (2000-2008) because the sources I reviewed included only limited amounts of data for this period. These gaps mean that my findings for my first period are weaker than for my second and third period, and that the discovery of this data could reveal different trends in U.S. behavior.

A second limitation is the author’s limited ability to read Mandarin and inability to read primary sources in Southeast Asian languages like Tagalog. The addition of primary sources in

these languages would add depth to a study of the South China Sea. Nonetheless, since English is a common language in scholarship, it is still possible to find these perspectives, albeit translated. Additionally, English sources will likely still provide the best possible insight into the United States' motivations, perspective, and interests in the South China Sea.

Finally, this thesis will be limited by the relative novelty of the framework being presented here. Little scholarly research has been conducted on the influence a peripheral setting could have on the dynamics of brinkmanship. There is also little research on how conventional war can be used as a brink in areas where nuclear war is unlikely or unbelievable. Following Thomas Schelling's infamous metaphor for brinkmanship, where he compares two states to two climbers trying to intimidate each other on the brink of a mountain precipice, there is little research on what happens when two climbers play chicken along a cliff only halfway up the mountain.⁵⁵ Does the change in height lower the risk, or make the fall quicker and therefore decrease the opportunity for one of the climbers' to save themselves? Despite the limitations of the novelty of these questions, the uniqueness of this case and its place in a gap in existing literature provides a valuable opportunity to add to existing knowledge and examine the applicability of theory even under unprecedented circumstances.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter two of this thesis reviews the three major bodies of literature relevant to a study of hegemonic behavior during times of global instability. The chapter explains and critiques the major tenets and predictions of foundational IR theories, theories of hegemony, and

⁵⁵ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (2020), 99.

brinkmanship theory, to prove why these theories need to be tested and combined into a new framework to comprehensively analyze and understand hegemonic behavior. Chapter three provides a history of the case, summarizing the history of U.S.-China relations, explaining the importance of the South China Sea in international politics, examining the United States' previous involvement in the region, and exploring the United States' general behavior during my timeframe. Chapter four examines quantitative and qualitative data to explain U.S. policy and behavior in the South China Sea, and analyze how it changed over time Chapter five tests the applicability of existing theories to the case of the South China Sea using my quantitative and qualitative data. This chapter also combines my findings into an analytical framework to explain hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global world order. Chapter six concludes the thesis, draws implications of the findings for theory and practice, and suggests areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEBATE ON HEGEMONY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This is the historical problem with rising powers. If you've studied your history, you know that these power transitions tend to not go smoothly.

—Paul Smith, interview with author

Three bodies of literature lend themselves to this study of hegemonic behavior during shifts in the global world order. First, important foundational frameworks lie in the fundamental international relations theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Although these fundamental paradigms provide important approaches for analyzing hegemony, each one alone cannot comprehensively explain the specific dynamics that accompany hegemonic behavior, or U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea. Therefore, this body of literature must be used in concert with scholarship on hegemony itself. Hegemonic order theory, which includes hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory, explains why hegemons rise to power and other states abide by the rules of hegemonic systems. However, this theory fails to comprehensively explain how the hegemon itself will respond to challenges to this order, or how it will behave towards a rising power in peripheral areas like the South China Sea.

In order to explain how a hegemon behaves and fill the holes left by foundational IR theory and hegemonic theory, I introduce literature on the strategy of brinkmanship. This coercive strategy is especially helpful due to its inclusion of theories of escalation, misperception, and psychology. These parts ensure brinkmanship provides the specific recommendations that the broader bodies of literature lack. However, the South China Sea has not yet been comprehensively investigated as a case of brinkmanship, so I will assess the

dynamics Thomas Schelling ascribed to brinkmanship to see if they are truly applicable to a situation like U.S-China relations in the SCS. If successful, these brinkmanship dynamics would be a significant building block in a comprehensive framework for understanding how hegemons respond to changes in the global world order. However, first each individual theory must be tested to see if they can comprehensively explain how U.S. policy towards China has changed over the last twenty years, and provide compelling predictions and explanations for hegemonic behavior.

REALISM, LIBERALISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM: INEFFECTIVE IN ISOLATION

The international relations paradigms of realism, liberalism, and constructivism provide the foundations for most theories of international relations. By providing scholars with core assumptions and broad analytical frameworks, these paradigms act as guides for examining the dynamics of the international system and interstate politics. However, they all emphasize different important factors driving international relations, and all have significant shortcomings that ensure none of them can be used in isolation to explain complex and multifaceted problems in international relations, such as U.S.-China competition in areas like the South China Sea.

REALISM

Realism as a paradigm, or as Joel Rosenthal calls it “a loose framework,”⁵⁶ emphasizes how the constraints on politics imposed by human nature and the absence of international government create a world where international relations are primarily governed by material

⁵⁶ Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1991), 7.

power.⁵⁷ As a result, realism is often favored by policy makers due to its “conformity with intuitive perception, clear-cut notions and succinct explanations.”⁵⁸ This emphasis on power as the driving force in international relations is founded in the works of Thucydides, Niccollo Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes,⁵⁹ whose philosophies led to five fundamental assumptions about the nature of international relations, which are laid out in table 2.1.

The most important of these five assumptions is the security dilemma, the natural selfishness of human nature, and the sovereignty of states existing in anarchy. These three phenomena are important because they fundamentally create an international order of distrust and conflict, where the only solution is power. In a security dilemma, parties expect the worst from each other and perceive each other’s behavior as threatening, thus leading to inevitable escalation of conflicts.⁶⁰ Power is the only true escape from this spiral of fear because “while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”⁶¹ Meanwhile, since human nature is inclined towards evil and selfishness, states must prioritize power and security, as a state can only enforce its laws if it has the “arms” to do so.⁶² Finally, following the work of Thomas Hobbes, realism argues that if states are sovereign, they exist in anarchy because they will naturally compete for resources. Additionally, since there is no higher power ordering international relations, states will use conflict and even war to guarantee their security.⁶³

⁵⁷ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 9.

⁵⁸ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 19.

⁵⁹ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 20-24.

⁶⁰ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 23.

⁶¹ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 22.

⁶² Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 25.

⁶³ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 23.

Although these are very broad ideas, they are pertinent to a study of the South China Sea because power has increasingly become the deciding factor in this region regarding territorial and maritime disputes, and aggressiveness of state behavior.

Table 2.1: Fundamental Assumptions of Realism

1. Human nature is inherently immoral and competitive, therefore states will pursue their narrow self-interests ⁶⁴
2. States are the central actors in international relations ⁶⁵
3. States exist in a state of anarchy ⁶⁶
4. Since human nature is fundamentally bad and states exist in anarchy, material power plays an overriding role in international relations to maintain their security ⁶⁷
5. Moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states ⁶⁸
Source: Author

Later scholars further developed these three assumptions, along with the ideas that states are the central actors in international relations and not subject to moral principles, into Classical Realism. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr further established the separation between states as actors and individuals as actors in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.⁶⁹ Similarly, Hans

⁶⁴ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 9.

⁶⁵ Jack Donnelly, "The Ethics of Realism" in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008), 154.

⁶⁶ Frederick Lewis Schuman, *International Politics: The Western State System in Transition*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill 1941), 9.

⁶⁷ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 10-11.

⁶⁸ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 10-11.

⁶⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, New York: C. Scribner's (1932); Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022).

Morgenthau argued in *Politics Among Nations*⁷⁰ that interests in international politics are defined in terms of power, and moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states or to universal laws.⁷¹ However, classical realism itself still largely consists of broad assumptions that do not comprehensively explain hegemonic behavior. After all, in classical realism a hegemon like the United States, which several experts argue still possesses the preponderance of power in the world,⁷² should be able to bring all its material power to bear to achieve its interests in areas like the South China Sea. Yet, the U.S. is not following those predictions, and its policy is better explained by specific sub-variants of realism, such as Neorealism and Offensive Realism.

Neorealism

Neorealism is a variant of realism that arose from Kenneth Waltz' 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*.⁷³ As seen in table 2.2, neorealists agree that states are the primary actors in international relations and that the international system is anarchic. They also emphasize the role of states as rational actors, their goals in the international system, and the influence of anarchy in state decision making.

⁷⁰ Authors like John A. Vasquez claim that *Politics Among Nations* both laid out the fundamental tenets of classical realism and established the dominance and importance of the realist paradigm. John A Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 17.

⁷¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace 1st ed* (New York: A. Knopf 1948), 4-10.

⁷² Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/18Ys5L_Ug5rLEz4B1dJKiBxXI68yhNxXh/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=100499727363606636194&rtpof=true&sd=true; James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jPlMfGEJHTVgw9pGhDv1RMaw5fWg_m428nbmXJM3Pfw/edit?usp=sharing.

⁷³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co. 1979); Jack Donnelly. *Realism and International Relations*. Themes in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Table 2.2: Key Points of Neorealism

1. States are rational actors pursuing their own narrow self interests
2. International relations are relations among states
3. The international system exists in anarchy
4. States' primary goal is to ensure their survival
5. The structure of the international system is the primary factor determining the foreign policy of states
6. States perceive other states as a potential threat, thus constantly reproducing the security dilemma in international politics

Source: Adapted from *International Relations Theory*⁷⁴

As shown in table 2.2, the main difference between classical realism and neorealism is that neorealist scholars focus on the system level of analysis and emphasize the importance of the structure of international systems.⁷⁵ In particular, Waltz argues that the similarities in “international life through the millenia” arise from the eternal structure of international anarchy.⁷⁶ In international anarchy, order arises from the interaction of separate, but equal political actors, and this anarchy ensures that states can only rely on themselves to realize their interests.⁷⁷ Additionally, Waltz argues that if states exist in anarchy and must be self-reliant, international political structures are determined by polarity, which describes the number of great powers in an international system.⁷⁸ According to Waltz, a bipolar world, where the international system is

⁷⁴ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 32.

⁷⁵ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 29; Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 16-17.

⁷⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co. 1979); Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Themes in International Relations, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 16.

⁷⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co. 1979), 179.

⁷⁸ Waltz introduces the idea of poles, and emphasizes the difference between bipolar systems, dominated by two superpowers, and multipolar systems, where there are three or more great powers in chapters 7 and 8 of *Theory of International Politics*.

dominated by two superpowers, is more stable than a multipolar system, where there are three or more great powers in a system.⁷⁹ Waltz measures stability “by the peacefulness of adjustment within the international system and by the durability of the system itself,”⁸⁰ or as Ted Hopf explains it: how often the poles of the system change and whether the poles can avoid great power war.⁸¹ Waltz believes that bipolar systems are more stable for two reasons. The first is that the two poles will offset each other’s material capabilities through “internal balancing,” which means by increasing their own militarily and economic power.⁸² Second, this internal balancing subordinates the importance of external balancing, meaning alliance building, and offsets the dangers of systems of alliances, such as weaker allies dragging their partners into war.⁸³

However, Waltz’s analysis fails to predict a situation where one of the poles in a bipolar system falls, resulting in a system dominated by a single great power. Robert Jervis addresses this unexplained phenomenon of unipolarity in “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective.”⁸⁴ Jervis defined unipolarity as a system where security concerns are greatly reduced for the unipole and its allies, the unipole can design the rules of a hierarchical system of international relations, and

⁷⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881–909. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863>, 881–884.

⁸⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881–909. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863>, 881–884, 881.

⁸¹ Ted Hopf, “Polarity, The Offense Defense Balance, and War,” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 2 (1991): 475–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963170>, 475.

⁸² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co. 1979), 168; Robert Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060225>, 190.

⁸³ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 168; Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881–909. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863>, 899–902; Robert Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060225>, 190.

⁸⁴ Robert Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060225>.

the unipole has the power to provide security and limit the autonomy of other states.⁸⁵ Jervis also debates the stability of a unipolar system, arguing that a system like the one governed by the United States at the end of the Cold War can lead other states to fear that the unipole's unilateral actions endanger their security. Such a system can also decrease the incentives for allies to cooperate with the unipole and incentivize the unipole's adversaries to engage in nuclear proliferation, which could destabilize the international system.⁸⁶

These theories of polarity and stability in the international system are clearly important to this study, as both American scholars like Cliff Kupchan⁸⁷ and Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong⁸⁸ argue that the international structure has transitioned from a unipolar system to a bipolar system divided between the U.S. and China. For neorealists, the dynamics occurring between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea can clearly be understood under this overarching framework of bipolarity. Yet, even Jervis does not truly examine how unipolarity can fade, how states would truly challenge a unipole, or how a unipole would react to a rising power. These questions about state behavior during shifts in the international system are partially answered by theories of defensive and offensive realism.

⁸⁵ Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060225>, 194.

⁸⁶ Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060225>, 207-212.

⁸⁷ For some examples, see: Cliff Kupchan, "Bipolarity is Back: Why It Matters," *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:4 (2021): 123-19; Suisheng Zhao, "The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31:134 (2022): 169-185.

⁸⁸ Xuetong Yan, "Emerging Bipolarity in the Current Global Order," *China US Focus*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/emerging-bipolarity-in-the-current-global-order>.

Defensive and Offensive Realism

Defensive Realism partially answers these questions of how states behave during structural changes to a unipolar system. Defensive realism builds off Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* and Jervis's article "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,"⁸⁹ and holds that the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions. This theory advises states to generally pursue moderate strategies and to pursue military, diplomatic, and foreign economic policies that communicate restraint.⁹⁰ Another answer lies in the subgroup of offensive realism, which is based on the work of John Mearsheimer.⁹¹

Based on neorealist assumptions, Mearsheimer argues in his work *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* that states live in an insecure world, but want to maximize their power and security. As a result, they are compelled to break out of this "security dilemma" by becoming the most powerful state in their given system, that is, a hegemon. In order to achieve hegemony, states will observe the systemic balance of power and look for opportunities to alter that balance "by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals."⁹² Since great powers tend to have a zero-sum mentality when dealing with each other, they will think offensively in terms of maximizing their relative power and ensuring their survival. This offensive mindset will thus lead them to have aggressive intentions towards their rivals.⁹³

However, Mearsheimer believes that although every great power aspires to world domination, "none has ever had or is likely to have the military capability to become a global

⁸⁹ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214.

⁹⁰ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000): 128-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2626708>.

⁹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001).

⁹² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 34.

⁹³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 21.

hegemon.”⁹⁴ Essentially, Mearsheimer argues that geography limits a state’s ability to project enough power across the globe to become global hegemon, especially across oceans.⁹⁵ Therefore, the best a state can hope for is to be a regional hegemon, such as the United States in the western hemisphere.⁹⁶ Mearsheimer argues that these regional hegemons will then act as offshore balancers to prevent peer-competitors from arising in other regions because they fear that a peer-regional hegemon could upset the balance of power in their region.⁹⁷ In this model, the great power of one region will allow local great powers in another region to check the power of a growing regional hegemon. Should these local great powers prove inept, then the great power will step in and help balance against the aspiring hegemon.⁹⁸

However, Christopher Layne argues in “The ‘Poster Child for Offensive Realism’: America as a Global Hegemon” that by ruling out the possibility of global hegemony, Mearsheimer’s “Diet Offensive Realism” paints regional hegemons as content, status quo powers.⁹⁹ Layne believes this characterization breaks with the logic of offensive realism, or “Robust Offensive Realism,” which argues that the permanent insecurity of international anarchy means that states can never afford to be satisfied with a given amount of power, or else risk their security.¹⁰⁰ Layne also points out that Mearsheimer’s claim that “the ideal situation for any great

⁹⁴John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 236.

⁹⁵ Although, he does make an exception for “the unlikely event wherein one state achieves clear-cut nuclear superiority”.

⁹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 41.

⁹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 142.

⁹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 236-237.

⁹⁹ Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 128-129.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 129.

power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world”¹⁰¹ implies a great power has the power and capabilities to secure its interests around the globe, making it necessarily a global hegemon.¹⁰² Therefore, since global hegemony is the best grand strategy for escaping the security dilemma presented by the anarchic international system, and a sole regional hegemon necessarily has the capabilities to be a global hegemon, a rational great power should want to become a global hegemon.¹⁰³ Layne cites the example of the United States after World War II,¹⁰⁴ arguing that the U.S. is a global hegemon who has successfully crossed oceans to establish forward bases and permanent troop positions in other regions.¹⁰⁵

Essentially, offensive realism uses the broader dynamics of neorealism to create a framework for how great powers, or even hegemons, will respond to structural changes in international relations. Once a state becomes a hegemon, either regional or global, it will use its power to balance against its rivals, prompt other states to contain rising powers, and if necessary behave aggressively to preemptively remove a rival before it can become a true challenger. This clear progression makes offensive realism a useful theory for my examination of U.S-China relations in the South China Sea. The stated progression of offensive realism also begs the question of whether defensive and offensive realism are truly as opposed as the literature makes

¹⁰¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton (2001), 35.

¹⁰² Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 130.

¹⁰³ Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 130

¹⁰⁴ Layne’s argument that “Only an insular power like the United States can successfully project its power into distant regions and bid for global hegemony” (127) because it is protected by the sea and was able to build up the military and naval capabilities to protect power, unlike continental powers that are “constantly pushing each other down” might make the U.S. more of a unique case than an exemplary case for his theory of “Robust Offensive Realism”.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 131-132.

them seem. There appears to be no reason why a state could not initially pursue a more cautious defensive realist strategy, and then become much more offensive once the rising power becomes a more pressing threat. From the point of view of a hegemon, defensive and offensive realism appear to have the same goal, the only difference is state intentions and perceptions of threats, concepts often ignored in realist theory in favor of pure power-balancing. However, between defensive and offensive realism, offensive realism is more useful for this study. Unlike defensive realism, offensive realism already focuses on the role hegemony plays in international relations, making it a more specific theory for explaining hegemonic behavior and how it changes. Additionally, offensive realism provides more specific and testable predictions for how a hegemon should respond to a rising power, making it a more useful framework for analyzing U.S.-China relations.

Realist predictions for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea

Many realists predict a fraught and conflict-ridden future for U.S.-China relations.¹⁰⁶ China is a rising power, and over the past two decades has significantly narrowed its power gap with the U.S.¹⁰⁷ Suisheng Zhao highlights and criticizes how neorealists have long argued that China's rise will inevitably lead to conflict with the United States.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Stephen Walt claims that a realist analysis of the future of U.S.-China relations predicts that China will seek to

¹⁰⁶ For some examples, see Stephen M. Walt, "Rising Powers and the Risks of War: A Realist View of Sino-American Relations," in *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful?: The Rise of a Great Power in Theory, History, Politics, and the Future*, ed. Asle Toje, New York: Oxford University Press (2017): pg. 13–32. Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); Thomas C. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster?: The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 81–126.

¹⁰⁷ Suisheng Zhao, "The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 169–185, 169.

¹⁰⁸ Suisheng Zhao, "The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 169–185.

push the United States out of East Asia to shore up its own security. However, in terms of the South China Sea, offensive realists predict several possible courses of actions. First, the U.S. will likely seek to expand and reinforce its existing network of regional allies.¹⁰⁹ This prediction seems to have some merit, as the U.S. has defined balancing and maintaining alliance commitments as one of its main interests in the South China Sea.¹¹⁰ In this vein, the U.S. has reinforced its alliance with the Philippines¹¹¹ and engaged in a new strategic partnership with Vietnam,¹¹² clearly showing its desire to balance against China in the region.

Second, since offensive realism holds that the U.S. will have a zero-sum mentality regarding “losing territory” to China, the U.S. will likely increase its military presence in the South China Sea. This increase in military presence could include placing military assets along the First Island Chain and turning it into a barrier in pursuit of an anti-access, area denial strategy against China.¹¹³ Another method could be increasing the number of U.S. troops and ships in the area. An example of this policy could be the increase of U.S.-Philippine Enhanced Defense

¹⁰⁹ Stephen M. Walt, “Rising Powers and the Risks of War: A Realist View of Sino-American Relations,” in *Will China’s Rise Be Peaceful?: The Rise of a Great Power in Theory, History, Politics, and the Future*, ed. Asle Toje, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): pg. 13–32, 23.

¹¹⁰ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 7.

¹¹¹ Jim Garamone, “U.S.-Philippine Alliance Strengthens as It Enters New Phase,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 2, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3286055/us-philippine-alliance-strengthens-as-it-enters-new-phase/>.

¹¹² “Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States-Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” The White House, September 11, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

¹¹³ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024; James Holmes, “Defend the First Island Chain,” United States Naval Institute, April 2014, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2014/april/defend-first-island-chain>.

Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)¹¹⁴ bases in February 2023 from five to nine. More EDCA bases means the number of U.S. troops and assets on rotational assignment in the South China Sea could also increase.¹¹⁵

Finally, and most broadly, offensive realism predicts that U.S. policy regarding China's behavior in the South China Sea will become more aggressive and confrontational. The United States will be much more likely to leverage its military power vis-a-vis China in the SCS, and there will likely be an increase in "dangerous" encounters between U.S. and Chinese naval ships and aircraft in the region.

Critiques of Realism

Despite the intuitive nature of realist assumptions, realism does have some significant drawbacks that ensure it cannot be used alone to analyze complex international dynamics, such as U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea. First, realism assumes that there are certain objective and unchanging patterns in international politics because human nature is fixed.¹¹⁶ Although international relations contain recurring and recognizable patterns, it is harder to claim that any single pattern of state interaction will remain unchanged no matter how technology advances or how interconnected the world becomes. After all, few people would argue that the world in 2023 is the same as it was in the 1950s-1970s when many fundamental realist texts

¹¹⁴ The EDCA is an agreement between the United States and the Philippines that facilitates joint training between the two countries. It gives the United States access to Philippine bases, both for training and for the preposition of U.S. assets. In return, the U.S. agreed to fund upgrades to these sites to increase the Philippines capacity to defend itself. For more information see; <https://amti.csis.org/more-than-meets-the-eye-philippine-upgrades-at-edca-sites/#:~:text=On%20April%203%2C%20Philippine%20and,Lal%2Dlo%20Airport%20in%20Cagayan> and <https://ph.usembassy.gov/enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-edca-fact-sheet/>.

¹¹⁵ "Philippines, U.S. Announce Locations of Four New EDCA Sites," U.S. Department of Defense, April 3, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3349257/philippines-us-announce-locations-of-four-new-edca-sites/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20stands%20steadfastly,and%20Lal%2Dlo%20Airport%20in>.

¹¹⁶ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 28.

were written. Mykola Kapitonenko even argues that some parts of realism were outdated by the time of the Vietnam War, creating “abstract patterns” quite removed from reality.¹¹⁷

Second, scholars like Kapitonenko and Stefano Guzzini rightly argue that realism as a whole failed to create a clear, operational definition of power.¹¹⁸ This lack of definition is a significant issue, as it forces scholars to make assumptions about what “power” means. States can be powerful in many different ways: they can be economic powerhouses like Germany,¹¹⁹ or powerful in terms of cultural influence,¹²⁰ like Japan is in East Asia.¹²¹ Most realists seem to assume, or specify, that power means material military power and capabilities, but this lack of a specific definition from the overall paradigm is nevertheless problematic.

Finally, there is a glaring problem with a paradigm that prioritizes the role of power, however it is defined, over other factors in international relations. The United States’ failures in asymmetric conflicts like the Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq prove that overwhelming material power and capabilities do not always determine the outcome of interstate conflict.¹²² Additionally, realism does not account for a state’s intentions or perceptions. Realism claims that the need to ensure its security drives a state’s foreign policy, but security itself is subject to interpretation and perception. How a state perceives its security and the power of

¹¹⁷ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 29.

¹¹⁸ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 28-29; Stefano Guzzini, “Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis,” *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 443–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706983>.

¹¹⁹ “GDP (Current US\$),” World Bank Open Data, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

¹²⁰ The Lowy Institute defines “cultural influence” as the ability to shape international public opinion through cultural appeal and interaction.

¹²¹ “Cultural Influence Data - Lowy Institute Asia Power Index,” data - Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, 2023, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/data/cultural-influence/>.

¹²² David Cortright, “The Vietnam War: Lessons Unlearned,” *Peace Policy*, May 18, 2015, <https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2015/05/18/the-vietnam-war-lessons-unlearned/>.

others will influence its behavior.¹²³ Although the balance of power in international relations and a state's desire for security are important, power is not the only factor at play.

Therefore, realism's inability to adapt to the changing realities of international politics, lack of a clear definition of power, and neglect of non-power related factors is why realism cannot be used alone to analyze complex international phenomena. Instead, the realist sub-variant of offensive realism must be incorporated into a larger, more comprehensive framework that also includes theories that account for these neglected factors.

LIBERALISM

Liberalism is a foundational paradigm of international relations that rejects realism's assumption that the anarchical nature of the international system inevitably leads to conflict. Instead, liberalism analyzes the role of international organizations, non-state actors, and domestic interests in shaping state interests and actions. It also emphasizes the structures and process of international cooperation, called interdependence.¹²⁴ Although liberalism contains many different sub-variants, table 2.3 outlines a set of fundamental assumptions that most liberal scholars follow.

¹²³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹²⁴ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 46-47.

Table 2.3: Fundamental Assumptions of Liberalism

1. An Anarchical International system does not inevitably lead to conflict¹²⁵ a. International structures and cooperation can mitigate anarchy 2. Non-State Actors play a role in international relations¹²⁶ a. Societal actors, such as individuals, private groups, and international organizations can influence state decision making b. These actors are on average are rational and risk-averse c. States can represent these societal actors in international relations 3. Interdependence¹²⁷ a. States are connected to each other through various channels b. These connections lower the cost of cooperation and increase the cost of conflict 4. Democratic Peace: Democracies do not fight each other¹²⁸ a. The institutions of representative democracy (ie. elected legislatures, free press) discourage democratic states from fighting other democracies b. Shared values and norms lead democratic states to regard each other as partners
Source: Author

Variants of liberalism will often further specify and define the four assumptions outlined in table 2.3 important factors to consider when conducting a study that involves the U.S. and

¹²⁵ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 46-47.

¹²⁶ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 46; Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513-53, 516-518

¹²⁷ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 47; Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513-53, 520.

¹²⁸ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 51.

China. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in their book *Power and Interdependence*¹²⁹ created the theory of complex interdependence, which they further developed in their article “Power and Interdependence Revisited.”¹³⁰ They explain that complex interdependence has three main characteristics. First, state policy goals are not fixed and issues vary in importance depending on context. Second, the existence of multiple channels of contact among societies, including financial and cultural exchange, allows for different levels and types of ties and interactions. Third, military force is largely irrelevant because the threat of military power can be nullified by the costs of exercising more dominant forms of power.¹³¹ For example, if a state uses military force, it may have to pay costs for damaging interdependent relations, such as ejection from a system that lowered the absolute costs of trade.¹³² Essentially, states engage in recurring cooperation because interdependence ensures mutual benefits, prosperity, and stability by lowering the costs of cooperation. Interdependence also makes the use of military force expensive by creating additional costs for breaking relations.¹³³

This brief summary of liberalism’s key assumption regarding the importance of interdependence clearly demonstrates why liberalism is useful for my study. First, it clearly accounts for the gaps in realist literature, such as states having more interests than just their security. Second, this concept of interdependence is particularly applicable to the case of U.S-China relations in the South China Sea. The U.S and China are connected in numerous

¹²⁹ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed, (New York: Longman 2001).

¹³⁰ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, “Power and Interdependence Revisited,” *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): pg. 725–753.

¹³¹ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislav M. Zubok, *International Relations: Brief Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 47-48; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, “Power and Interdependence Revisited,” *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): pg. 725–753, 730, 737-738.

¹³² Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed, (New York: Longman 2001); Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 65.

¹³³ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 65.

ways, but especially economically. In 2022, the United States' goods and services trade with China was worth an estimated \$758.4 billion, and both countries have directly invested in the other's economy.¹³⁴ Understanding interdependence and how it influences foreign policy is crucial to analyzing U.S. policy towards China, especially in an economically important region like the South China Sea.¹³⁵ Liberalism is also useful because it provides the foundations for Structural Liberalism, which is a more specific framework for contextualizing and explaining the dynamics at play in hegemonic systems.

Structural Liberalism

Structural Liberalism was created by Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry to explain and justify the “Western Liberal Order”¹³⁶ (hereafter “the Liberal World Order” or LWO, as used by Ikenberry to describe this same system six years later).¹³⁷ Deudney and Ikenberry define the Liberal World Order as a political, economic, and strategic order created in the wake of World War II by the United States and its allies “as a solution to the problems that led to the depression and world war.” They argue that realism and power balancing cannot explain the Liberal World Order's consensual and reciprocal relations, degree of Western institutionalization, multilateral pattern, and stable acceptance of 'semi-sovereign' states.¹³⁸ Therefore, they created the theory of

¹³⁴ “The People's Republic of China,” United States Trade Representative, 2023, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.

¹³⁵ Sam Bateman, “Sea lines of communication and safety of navigation” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 46-64, 51.

¹³⁶ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 179.

¹³⁷ G. John Ikenberry, “Power and liberal order: America's postwar world order in transition”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2005, Pages 133–152, 1.

¹³⁸ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 179-180.

structural liberalism to explain the characteristics of the LWO and analyze its role in international politics.

The first key characteristic of structural liberalism is “security co-binding,” where states mutually bind each other to institutions to constrain one another’s behavior in either asymmetrical or symmetrical relationships.¹³⁹ Deudney and Ikenberry argue that co-binding helps states overcome the practices and dynamics of anarchy by establishing institutions of mutual constraint that makes state behavior more predictable and restrained.¹⁴⁰ They also claim that although asymmetrical binding “is characteristic of hegemony or empire,” liberal states tend to practice a more reciprocal, symmetric, and non-hierarchical co-binding.¹⁴¹ This final claim is the least compelling in their description of co-binding, as the United States’ position as hegemon and the different levels of alliances within the LWO indicate at least some hierarchy within the order.

The second key point of structural liberalism is the role of “Penetrated Hegemony,”¹⁴² a hegemonic system that includes “transparency, the diffusion of power into many hands, and the multiple points of access to policy-making.”¹⁴³ They use American Hegemony as an example, explaining how American Hegemony has been penetrated by subordinate actors because it possesses methods for these actors to register their interests with the hegemon. They argue that

¹³⁹ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 181-182.

¹⁴⁰ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 182.

¹⁴¹ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 181.

¹⁴² Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 185.

¹⁴³ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 185.

the penetrated nature of American Hegemony makes it “highly legitimate,” and makes the international system more stable because subordinate actors feel they have an influence and stake in decision-making processes. Therefore, “Penetrated Hegemony” makes the hegemonic system more acceptable to subordinate powers and reduces conflict between these powers and the hegemon.¹⁴⁴ Although the reciprocity exhibited by the Liberal World Order may make it legitimate relative to empire-style hegemonic systems, the United States’ willingness to act unilaterally in situations like the U.S. Invasion of Iraq brings this assertion into question.¹⁴⁵

Third, structural liberalism argues that international orders can use semi-sovereignty to incorporate potential adversaries or “problem states.”¹⁴⁶ The concept of semi-sovereignty argues that states are semi-sovereign when they do not possess all the necessary characteristics of sovereignty¹⁴⁷ because some of these characteristics are “subordinate to a supra-national international order.”¹⁴⁸ Deudney and Ikenberry argue that through the structure of semi-sovereignty, the Liberal World Order incorporated previously hostile states and made them useful members of the order. Through the examples of Germany and Japan post-WWII, they show how these two states accepted domestic political structures based on American models and values that limited their state military capabilities to defense only,¹⁴⁹ in return for U.S. sovereign

¹⁴⁴ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 185-186.

¹⁴⁵ For a more in depth discussion of U.S. Unilateralism, especially surrounding the Iraq War see: David, Skidmore, “Understanding the Unilateralist Turn in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1, no. 2 (2005): 207–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24907227>.

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 181.

¹⁴⁷ Stephen Krasner lists these characteristics as control, authority, non-intervention, recognition, and territoriality in “Pervasive Not Perverse: Semi-Sovereigns as the Global Norm”, pg. 651.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen D. Krasner, “Pervasive Not Perverse: Semi-Sovereigns as the Global Norm,” *Cornell International Law Journal*: Vol. 30: No. 3, Article 3, (1997): pg. 651-680, 652.

¹⁴⁹ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 189.

recognition and acceptance into the LWO.¹⁵⁰ Despite Japan and Germany presenting compelling examples, this approach notably failed to bring China into the Liberal World Order.¹⁵¹

Fourth, structural liberalism emphasizes the importance of economic openness. Deudney and Ikenberry argue that the substantial absolute gains to be derived from economic openness incentivize states to create institutions to abridge anarchy.¹⁵² These institutions then encourage greater economic ties and interdependence. They also claim that western states maintain an open economic order because free trade tends to lead to the expansion of capitalism, and capitalism inclines states towards western liberal ideals and democracy.¹⁵³ Such states would naturally be more compatible with the Liberal World Order. Unfortunately, economic openness failed to liberalize China, which maintained its authoritarian regime while using the LWO's economic openness to increase its wealth and power.¹⁵⁴

Finally, Deudney and Ikenberry argue that an essential component of structural liberalism is “a widespread civic identity that is distinct from national, ethnic, and religious identities.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 188.

¹⁵¹ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy: China’s Rise and the Future of Global Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (2019): 92–102, 95; Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, “China’s Economic Reform and Opening at Forty: Past Accomplishments and Emerging Challenges” in *To Get Rich Is Glorious: Challenges Facing China’s Economic Reform and Opening at Forty*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press (2019).

¹⁵² Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 191.

¹⁵³ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 192.

¹⁵⁴ Yi Wen and Scott Wolla, “China’s Rapid Economic Rise: A New Application of an Old Recipe,” *Social Education* 81, no. 2 (2017): pp 93– 97; Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, “China’s Economic Reform and Opening at Forty: Past Accomplishments and Emerging Challenges” in *To Get Rich Is Glorious: Challenges Facing China’s Economic Reform and Opening at Forty*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press (2019); Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy: China’s Rise and the Future of Global Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (2019): 92–102.

¹⁵⁵ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 193.

They define this civic identity as a consensus around the importance and correctness of western liberal ideals, such as political democracy, individual rights, private property-based economic systems, and toleration of diversity in the non-civic areas of ethnicity and religion.¹⁵⁶ Since identity is necessarily shaped by context, liberal civic identity and the Liberal World Order mutually reinforce one another, decreasing conflict between parties in the system and integrating states and their societies under a single, larger civic identity.¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the rise in nationalism in states within the LWO, including the United States, indicates that the influence of this supranational civic identity is either weak or subordinate to national identities.¹⁵⁸

Deudney and Ikenberry present a compelling argument that these five factors of security co-binding, penetrated hegemony, semi-sovereignty, economic openness, and civic identity play crucial roles in the Liberal World Order. As shown in table 2.4, these five characteristics help maintain a stable international order and facilitate international relations by mitigating anarchy, enhancing legitimacy, incorporating problematic states, creating interdependence, and moderating conflict.

¹⁵⁶ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 193.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 195.

¹⁵⁸ Yoram Hazony, Farah Pandith, Jerry Seib, and Elise Labott, “The Rise of Nationalism at Home and Abroad,” (webinar, March 9, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/event/rise-nationalism-home-and-abroad>.

Table 2.4: Key Characteristics of Structural Liberalism

Characteristic	Role
Security co-binding	Mitigates dynamics of anarchy
Penetrated reciprocal hegemony	Enhances legitimacy through access & shared decision-making
Semi-sovereign & partial great powers	Incorporates problem states
Economic openness	Exploits comparative advantage & creates interdependence
Civic identity	Moderates conflict & facilitates integration

Source: Based on chart from *The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order*, page 181

In terms of American Hegemony, these five characteristics and their functions explain why this system exists, and why it has been successful. Therefore, this framework is useful for a study of U.S-China relations and changes in hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global world order, because it demonstrates how the U.S. maintained American hegemony in the past. If the U.S. has continued to employ the tools of structural liberalism in the South China Sea, then this would indicate strong continuities in U.S. policy and hegemonic behavior. However if the U.S. is applying new strategies and policies to maintain its hegemony, then this change would hold interesting implications for how the United States is formulating policy towards China in the South China Sea. Finally, structural liberalism is also useful for my study because, unlike broader liberal theories, it is a theory aimed at explaining hegemonic systems that provides specific tools for examining U.S. policy towards China in the SCS.

Liberal Predictions for U.S. Policy the South China Sea

According to common liberal predictions,¹⁵⁹ the U.S. will engage in a strategy of “liberal engagement” with China by increasing the two countries’ economic and societal ties. In response China will accept the overarching structure of the LWO because of its own self-interest and its deepening interdependence with the United States. As a result, it is possible that even if China becomes a global great power, it may still choose to adhere to the Liberal World Order because of the low costs of entry and benefits of participating in terms of prosperity and legitimacy.¹⁶⁰

In terms of the South China Sea, the U.S will likely employ the structural liberal features of security co-binding and semi-sovereignty to alter Chinese behavior. Through security co-binding, the U.S. will bind itself and China to restraining institutions to reduce the risks of conflict. A current example of this strategy is the United States’ attempts to mitigate China’s expansionist behavior in the South China Sea through the United Nations Law on the Convention of the Sea (UNCLOS),¹⁶¹ which China ratified in 1996¹⁶² and the U.S. enforces as a matter of

¹⁵⁹ For an example of some liberals who discuss this prediction, see: G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the liberal system survive?,” *Foreign Affairs* 87: 1, Jan.–Feb.2008, pg. 23–37; Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137594>.

¹⁶⁰ Naná De Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, “US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?” *International affairs* 84, no. 1 (2018): 113–131. <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/1/113/4762687>.

¹⁶¹ Sam Bateman defines UNCLOS as a UN Convention that provides the broad principles and the framework for international regimes and treaties dealing with the safety of navigation in the *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, chapter 3.

¹⁶² Feng Zhu and Lingqun Li, “China’s South China Sea policies,” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 167–183, 169.

customary law.¹⁶³ The U.S. will also promote other co-binding agreements that reduce the risk of military exchanges in the South China Sea, such as a Code of Conduct.¹⁶⁴

As for employing semi-sovereignty in the SCS, the United States could offer to give China some sort of partial sovereign recognition under the auspices of the Liberal World Order in return for China accepting a subordinate role in that order and dropping its more extreme claims that threaten that order. This could manifest in the U.S accepting some of China's SCS claims, which could be risky since it might anger U.S. allies in the region, especially the Philippines. However, scholars like Ambassador Chas Freeman have suggested the concept of *uti possidetis*¹⁶⁵ as a possible way to resolve the South China Sea disputes, and this concept could be used as the carrot to draw China into the LWO in a semi-sovereign position.¹⁶⁶ *Uti possidetis* is a legal justification “both for the retention of territory acquired in war and for peaceful coexistence and acquiescence in inherited frontiers between newly independent states.”¹⁶⁷ In the case of the South China Sea, *Uti possidetis* essentially states that territorial possessions remain unchanged

¹⁶³ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 127.

¹⁶⁴ As of March 2024, all the South China Sea claimants, especially China, have yet to agree upon and create a code of conduct governing behavior on the South China Sea. However, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China did jointly issue the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002. This declaration is not a formal code, but the parties did pledge to peacefully settle their differing territorial and maritime claims peacefully and “exercise self-restraint.” Full text of the declaration is available here: <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/>. For more information on the various negotiations surrounding a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, see: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinasea/code-of-coknduct-02072024014051.html>.

¹⁶⁵ *Uti possidetis* is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase “*Uti possidetis, ita possidetis*”, meaning “what you have, you may continue to hold.”

¹⁶⁶ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024. Transcript available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1j5078fJmJEh9d5MO9bfOgJkQoooVaiPj552lmubg9EO/edit?usp=sharing>.

¹⁶⁷ Chas Freeman, “Diplomacy on the Rocks: China and Other Claimants in the South China Sea,” Providence, Rhode Island, April 10, 2015. <https://chasfreeman.net/diplomacy-on-the-rocks-china-and-other-claimants-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

no matter how they were acquired.¹⁶⁸ Ambassador Freeman argues that most of the SCS claimants truly have no desire to alter the status quo, and that China would settle its disputes with the other claimant countries if not for U.S.-China adversarial antagonism.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, the U.S. could agree to promote *uti possidetis* in the South China Sea in return for China agreeing to behave according to international law and dropping its claims to territory it does not currently control.

Critiques of Liberalism

Liberalism has three main flaws. The first is that many liberal assumptions are based on analyses of highly developed countries, who have in the last century largely avoided violent conflicts with each other due to growing interdependence. However interdependence has not prevented conflict in the developing world, and it is a mistake to believe that the processes that worked for the developed countries are necessarily applicable to every state in the world.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, interdependence did not prevent war from breaking out between developed trading partners in World War II, such as the U.S. and Japan.

Second, liberalism tends to overestimate the ability of international organizations and institutions to prevent or limit conflict. Although regional alliances, such as NATO, and supra-regional organizations like the European Union, have proven effective at influencing state

¹⁶⁸ Chas Freeman, “Diplomacy on the Rocks: China and Other Claimants in the South China Sea,” Providence, Rhode Island, April 10, 2015.
<https://chasfreeman.net/diplomacy-on-the-rocks-china-and-other-claimants-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁶⁹ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Mykola Kapitonenko, *International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge 2022), 73.

behavior, the United Nations often faces criticism for its inability to prevent or solve interstate or intrastate conflict.¹⁷¹

Finally, many liberal theories, especially those based on structural liberalism, are in danger of becoming outdated. Structural liberalism was created in 1999, and despite fervent hopes from U.S. intellectuals, the world did not turn into a liberal, democratic utopia. In fact, liberalism can even be a source of conflict in modern international politics as it sets the U.S. and its allies against authoritarian regimes, labeling non-democratic states threats and enemies. Additionally, as shown in my critique of each of the five key characteristics of structural liberalism, many of these tenets do not completely align with current U.S. behavior. They also do not explain how China has participated in the Liberal World Order without fully joining it. These critiques lead me to question whether structural liberalism is truly a generalizable theory, or a theory that simply described American Hegemony in the decade after the Cold War. Therefore, this theory must be tested in the current international climate of changing world orders, and used along with more specific and relevant theories to provide useful findings for theory and policy.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is fundamentally a paradigm about ideas, and argues that the social world is constructed, not given. It focuses on interpreting meaning, and examining how changing practices, places, norms, and identities influence international relations.¹⁷² Perhaps because of this emphasis on the influence of ideas and the importance of change, constructivism itself is a

¹⁷¹ Emad Mayer-Mruwat, "UNITED NATIONS: CRITIQUES AND REFORMS," *Journal of Third World Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998): 221–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45197792>.

¹⁷² Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–4.

constantly expanding paradigm without a clear definition or core set of assumptions.¹⁷³ Therefore, in order to understand the core characteristics of constructivism, I examine the work of three notable constructivist scholars: Nicholas Onuf, Friedrich Kratochwil, and Alexander Wendt.

In 1989 Nicholas Onuf wrote *World of Our Making*,¹⁷⁴ where he introduced the international relations theory of constructivism.¹⁷⁵ He then further developed the theory in his book *Constructivism: A User's Manual*. Onuf argues that identity formation, rules and ideas about what people should do, and language are all important factors in social construction and therefore critical factors to analyze when examining international relations from a constructivist lens.¹⁷⁶ Friedrich Kratochwil then adopted the term “constructivism” and some of Onuf’s basic tenets and used them to develop his own variant of constructivist theory.¹⁷⁷ His version in his 1989 book *Rules, Norms, and Decisions*, focuses on the importance of norms in context and language in international politics. Kratochwil’s conceptualization of constructivism shares Onuf’s emphasis on rules and norms, but further highlights the important role of language in the construction of international politics. He also introduced the importance of context and its

¹⁷³ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 3-8.

¹⁷⁴ Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (1989).

¹⁷⁵ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁷⁶ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10; Nicholas G. Onuf, and Pauk Kowert, Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe (1998), pp. 58-78, 59; Nicholas G. Onuf, “Constructivism: A User’s Manual,” in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. V. Kubáľková, Nicholas G. Onuf, and Pauk Kowert, Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe (1998), pp. 58-78, 66.

¹⁷⁷ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

influence on the social acceptance of rules and norms.¹⁷⁸ Finally, Alexander Wendt built off Onuf's concept of constructivism in his 1992 article "Anarchy Is What States Make of It."¹⁷⁹ Wendt's work, including his book *Social Theory of International Politics*, is largely credited with popularizing constructivism as an international relations paradigm.¹⁸⁰ Wendt emphasizes the importance of identity, and his analysis of international politics focuses on "the relationship between what actors do and what they are."¹⁸¹ According to Wendt, intersubjective practice constructs interests and identities, which are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self."¹⁸² These constructed identities and interests in turn determine how international politics are conducted and what type of international system will prevail.¹⁸³

Based on these versions of constructivism, I identify four important constructivist assumptions for analyzing international relations: identity, rules and norms, language, and context. As laid out in table 2.5, Onuf and Wendt both address the role of identity in human interaction, Onuf and Kratochwil acknowledge the influence of rules and language on international relations, and Kratochwil and Wendt highlights how context affects the acceptance

¹⁷⁸ Frederick Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989), 10-12, 34; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (1992), 391–425.

¹⁸⁰ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

¹⁸¹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (1992), 391–425; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 15.

¹⁸² Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (1992), 391–425, 397.,

¹⁸³ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (1992), 391–425, 401; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

of rules and norms. These three authors also all argue that international relations is not a given. Unlike realists and liberals, who assume certain permanent features of the international system, constructivists see international relations as something under constant construction.

Table 2.5: General Assumptions of Constructivism

Feature	Author (* indicates main author who discusses this feature)
Importance of Identity	*Wendt, Onuf
Influence of rules	*Onuf, *Kratochwil
Role of Language	Onuf, *Kratochwil
Role of Context	*Kratochwil, Wendt

Source: Author

Constructivist Predictions for U.S. Policy the South China Sea

It is difficult to use constructivism as a paradigm to make predictions about how the U.S. will behave in the South China Sea. However, I can make predictions based on the approach of a constructivist that writes about the U.S. in Asia: Kishore Mahbubani.¹⁸⁴ Mahbubani argues in a series of essays compiled in his book *The Asian 21st Century* that the U.S. and the West will have to significantly change their mindsets and conceptions about how the world works if they want to succeed in the 21st century. For example, Mahbubani argues that the U.S. and its European allies will have to accept that the West can no longer dominate the world, and that Western society contains deep flaws. He also challenges the idea that western societies are

¹⁸⁴ Kishore Mahbubani, *The Asian 21st Century* (Singapore: Springer Nature 2022).

inherently good, and critiques them as deeply hypocritical when it comes to issues like protecting human rights, poverty, and freedom.¹⁸⁵

Based on Mahbubani's approach, if the United States wants to avoid conflict and engage in cooperation with China in the South China Sea, U.S. leaders, policymakers, and scholars will need to fundamentally change their mindset about the United States' role in the SCS. U.S. leaders will have to rethink their assumptions about which states should lead the world order, arbitrate territorial and maritime disputes, and accept that China can be politically, culturally, and economically prominent and important in the region. If these U.S. leaders are able to deconstruct their inherent biases and accept the idea of non-western global governance, perhaps they will be able to work with China, and Asian countries more broadly, to peacefully resolve the South China Sea disputes.

Critique of Constructivism

Constructivism is clearly a broad, flexible, and innovative paradigm, but it is telling that constructivism is largely defined by not being realism or liberalism.¹⁸⁶ Its lack of specific, central analytical assumptions make it a difficult theory to use when examining a particular case. After examining the work of Onuf, Kratochwil, Wendt, and Mahbubani, it seems that constructivists often have to make their own version of constructivism to analyze international relations, or refine their definition to analyze a specific case. Although there have been groundbreaking works founded in the constructivist paradigm, such as Nina Tannenwald's examination of the idea of

¹⁸⁵ Kishore Mahbubani, *The Asian 21st Century* (Singapore: Springer Nature 2022), 2-3.

¹⁸⁶ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-4.

the Nuclear Taboo,¹⁸⁷ constructivism as a paradigm is still too broad to make compelling predictions for U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea.

THEORIES OF HEGEMONY: A HEGEMON SHAPED HOLE

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has been dominated by the United States, which has acted as the giant of the Liberal World Order and a global hegemon.¹⁸⁸ Although the concept of hegemony was briefly explored during my discussion of offensive realism and structural liberalism, the specific study of hegemons and hegemonic systems are grouped under what G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon call “theories of interstate hegemony.” These theories “focus on a particular kind of international hierarchy: those in which a leading political community uses its outsized military and economic capabilities to organize, at least in part, relations among weaker polities.”¹⁸⁹ These theories not only explain how the existence of a hegemon creates stability in the international order, but they also predict how states will change their behavior during periods of power transitions.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁸ Christopher Layne, “The “Poster Child for Offensive Realism”: America as a global hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 121. James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024; Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtvr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoIn6o/edit?usp=sharing>.

¹⁸⁹ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders.” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 396.

¹⁹⁰ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders.” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 396.

HEGEMONIC ORDER THEORY

Hegemonic order theory is based on the combination of two distinct theories: Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) and Power Transition Theory (PTT).¹⁹¹ Ikenberry and Nexon argue that these two theories mainly differ in methodology, with hegemonic-stability theory using qualitative approaches and power-transition theory using statistical analysis.¹⁹² They also differ in the scope of what they explain. Hegemonic stability theory fundamentally explains why hegemonic orders and systems are stable, and power transition theory explains what happens when a hegemon and its order are challenged. Nonetheless, several scholars argue that these theories share a set of common principles, problems, and understandings of international politics.¹⁹³ Therefore, this section will explain the development, main assumptions, and strengths of these theories, before examining their shared conclusions under hegemonic order theory and their predictions for the United States' South China Sea policy during times of shifts in the world order. This section will then conclude with an analysis of hegemonic order theory's limitations, and an explanation of its potential role in this study.

Hegemonic Stability Theory:

Hegemonic stability theory claims hegemony both facilitates the creation of an international order and is necessary for the continuous maintenance of that order.¹⁹⁴ The theory

¹⁹¹ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

¹⁹² John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 403.

¹⁹³ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 403; Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686, 664.

¹⁹⁴ Jelena Belic and Zoltan Miklosi, "Cosmopolitanism and Unipolarity: The Theory of Hegemonic Transition," *Critical review of international social and political philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2023): 181–203.

presumes that the dominance of the hegemon, usually measured in terms of relative military power, gives this state both the capacity to enforce an international order and an interest in providing an order that is beneficial to more parties and therefore less costly to maintain.¹⁹⁵ According to Duncan Snidal,¹⁹⁶ this theory originates in the work of Charles Kindleberger, who argued that free trade requires a "benevolent despot" to provide certain institutional public goods.¹⁹⁷ The "public goods" in question are international regimes, also called international orders, that foster open trade through methods like low tariffs and stable monetary relations.¹⁹⁸

Given that creating and enforcing such a regime is difficult, a state would only do so if the benefits outweighed the costs of providing it. This argument that only a preeminent power, such as a hegemon, would be willing to provide these "public goods" was adopted by Robert Keohane and made central to his original conception of classic hegemonic stability theory.¹⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the coercive potential of a hegemon was explored in Stephen Krasner and Robert Gilpin's more centralized model of hegemonic stability theory.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 589.

¹⁹⁶ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 580.

¹⁹⁷ Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Charles Kindleberger, "Systems of International Economic Organization," in *Money and the Coming World Order*, ed. David Calleo, (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

¹⁹⁸ Robert Keohane, "The Demand for International Regimes," *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982); Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 580; Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

¹⁹⁹ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 581.

²⁰⁰ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 585-590.

Hegemonic Stability Theory in Debate: Benevolent Despot or Coercive Tyrant?

Keohane's version of hegemonic stability theory introduced two fundamental arguments. First, the presence of a dominant actor in the international system allows for the creation of a stable international regime of free trade. Second, this stable regime benefits smaller states even more than the hegemon itself because they bear none of the maintenance costs, but receive the same benefits.²⁰¹ This distribution of benefits reinforces the stability of the hegemonic system as long as it is equal, but when the benefits are unequal, subordinate states can become dissatisfied with the regime and potentially incentivized to destabilize it.²⁰² Additionally, Keohane's hegemon functions as a "benevolent despot," which creates and maintains a decentralized regime where it receives a large share of the benefits, but also allows benefits to spread to all states. However, Duncan Snidal claims this version of HST is fundamentally static in nature, and argues that Kindleberger and Keohane's model of HST, the "benevolent leadership of the decentralized model," is inferior to Krasner and Gilpin's "coercive leadership of the centralized model."²⁰³

Snidal argues that Krasner and Gilpin's version is a "coercive model of leadership" because it focuses on the hegemon's effectiveness at coercing other states and imposing itself as a centralized authority, rather than its ability to provide public goods.²⁰⁴ This argument is overall accurate, as Stephen Krasner argues in "State Power and the Structure of International Trade"

²⁰¹ Robert Keohane, "The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Changes in International Economic Regimes," in *Change in the International System*, ed. O. Holsti, R. Siverson, and A. George, (Boulder: Westview 1980); Robert Keohane, "The Demand for International Regimes," *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982); Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984).

²⁰² Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 582.

²⁰³ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 585–590.

²⁰⁴ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 588.

that a hegemon will use its preeminent status to create a trading system to its own advantage. This trading system may unintentionally create an open international economy that benefits a wider set of nation-states, but that is not the hegemon's goal.²⁰⁵ This model also incorporates Robert Gilpin's argument that the dominant power both provides the "public goods" of the regime and uses its superior power to extract contributions toward the good from subordinate states. Therefore, subordinate states have to balance the costs and benefits of participating in the hegemonic system, and will accept their exploitation only as long as the costs of acceptance are less than the costs of overthrowing the hegemon. In this model, smaller states only view hegemonic leadership as legitimate if the net benefits of participating in the regime outweigh the costs exacted by the hegemon.²⁰⁶

Critique of Hegemonic Stability Theory

Snidal argues that hegemonic stability theory has overall been applied too broadly, and can only truly be applied to issue areas if they meet three assumptions.²⁰⁷ The first technical assumption is that of jointness, where different states are able to simultaneously consume the same good.²⁰⁸ This critique highlights that although the term "public good" is broad, hegemons rarely provide physical "goods," such as cash or food. Instead they provide abstract goods, like security or an economic system that all members can participate in.

²⁰⁵ Stephen Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade," *World Politics* 28 (April 1976).

²⁰⁶ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 587–589.

²⁰⁷ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 590.

²⁰⁸ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 590.

The second assumption is that the hegemon is able to at least partially exclude non-participants from benefiting from the system. I take this critique one step further and argue that a hegemon should want to exclude non-participants from benefiting from the system. A rational hegemon should desire to maintain its position of primacy,²⁰⁹ and therefore should want to prevent a potential rival from having unlimited access to a public good, especially if that good could empower the rival. It should also want the ability to revoke access to a public good, such as a shared financial system, should a state behave against its interest. An example of a hegemon's ability to deny access to public good systems is shown in how the United States uses economic sanctions and organizations to punish adversaries, like Russia, for breaking the tenets of the Liberal World Order.²¹⁰

Finally, hegemonic stability theory rests on the assumption that collective action is impossible, thus international stability requires a hegemon. However, Snidal correctly points out that if the hegemonic system contains states that vary in size, then cooperation between the largest subordinate states could maintain the system even if the hegemon loses its position of primacy.²¹¹ This analysis aligns with the liberal predictions for U.S-China relations discussed earlier, which hypothesize that the Liberal World Order provides enough benefits that China might continue to support it even if the U.S. loses its position as hegemon. Therefore, hegemonic stability theory can only be applied when the hegemon provides a good that multiple states can

²⁰⁹ John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton (2001), 34; Christopher Layne, "The "Poster Child for Offensive Realism": America as a global hegemon," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120-164, 129.

²¹⁰ "Fact Sheet: United States, G7 and EU Impose Severe and Immediate Costs on Russia," The White House, April 6, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/06/fact-sheet-united-states-g7-and-eu-impose-severe-and-immediate-costs-on-russia/>.

²¹¹ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614. 595.

consume simultaneously and when the hegemon can partially exclude non-participants from accessing the good, and the hegemon has created a system where collective action is possible.

These three critiques also highlight the importance of HST to my thesis. Classical hegemonic stability theory explains how and why a state would create a hegemonic system, while Gilpin and Krasner's Coercive Leadership Model better aligns with the characteristics of American Hegemony. Therefore, analyzing U.S-China relations and U.S. policy in the South China Sea through this Coercive Leadership Model of hegemonic stability theory will allow me to establish the role of the Liberal World Order in the South China Sea, and explain policy choices the U.S. made to maintain that order. These critiques also display why hegemonic stability theory is often used in concert with power transition theory. Although HST explains why hegemonic systems are stable, it does not explore what occurs when a dissatisfied state gains the power to challenge or overthrow the hegemonic system. This period of transition is instead explained by power transition theory.

Power Transition Theory

Power transition theory was first created by A.F.K Organski in 1958,²¹² and arose from his dissatisfaction with the existing balance of power theory.²¹³ PTT breaks with fundamental realist and liberal assumptions and argues that states exist in a hierarchical model of international relations.²¹⁴ In this model, states are placed in a pyramid, where the dominant hegemon "controls

²¹² A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

²¹³ According to the balance of power theory, states seek to maximize their power, but some powerful states may serve as a balance to ensure that an alliance or a single state does not become too powerful and consequently disrupt the balance of power within the international order. In a later work, Organski and Kugler defined this rise of a dissatisfied power as states achieving parity in *The War Ledger*.

²¹⁴ Charles J. Koch, "Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 88.

the existing international order” from the top, followed by the next level of great powers, then a level of middle powers, and finally small powers.²¹⁵ Within this pyramid, states are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the international system, but the status quo is ultimately determined by the dominant state in the system, the hegemon.²¹⁶

A power transition becomes possible in this hierarchical system when a rising dissatisfied state becomes more powerful than the declining dominant state.²¹⁷ Organski and Kugler would define the situation as a rising state achieving “parity” with the dominant power, which they claim occurs when one state’s power is eighty percent or more of another state’s power.²¹⁸ This idea of parity was amended by the work of Houweling and Siccama, who found that the rate of power growth was also important when considering parity.²¹⁹ When this parity occurs, the rising power must decide whether to challenge the hegemon, and the hegemon must decide whether to resist that challenge or acquiesce and allow the rising power to become dominant.²²⁰ However, how exactly the power transition occurs is a topic of debate.

Robert Gilpin argues in his book *War and Change*²²¹ that a hegemon under threat from a rising power can take two courses of action, neither of which is necessarily exclusive. The first is that the hegemon can seek to increase the resources devoted to protecting its interests,

²¹⁵ A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 326.

²¹⁶ Charles J. Koch, “Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 88.

²¹⁷ Charles J. Koch, “Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 89

²¹⁸ A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 49.

²¹⁹ Henk Houweling and Jan Siccama, “Power Transitions as a Cause of War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 32, no. 1 (1988): 101.

²²⁰ Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, “When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?” *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 4 (1992): 896–922. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111353>, 898-899.

²²¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

maintaining its commitments, and supporting its position in the international system.²²² It can gain these additional resources through domestic politics, such as increasing domestic taxation, demanding greater support from other states, or improving its efficiency when using existing resources. This third option of using innovation and technology to improve resource use is the most stable option, but all three policy choices can encounter difficulties, such as domestic resistance to taxation or innovation, or international refusal to provide additional support.²²³

The second path open to a hegemon facing a rising power is to reduce the costs of maintaining its position in the international system. It can reduce those costs by eliminating the cause of the rising costs, choosing a more defensive and less costly perimeter, or reducing international commitments. Gilpin argues that the most attractive option is to eliminate the rising power, and a hegemon will thus launch a preventative war to destroy or weaken the rising power while it still has the military advantage.²²⁴ Gilpin supports this argument by citing the decision of Sparta to attack Athens during the Peloponnesian war, and claiming that historically when states were faced with the choice of “decline or fight,” states most often chose to fight.²²⁵

Dale Copeland also argues that the declining hegemonic power is likely to initiate a war against a rising power. However, he argues that the polarity of the international system influences the declining state’s ability to make war, and emphasizes the differentiation of military, economic, and potential power when examining a state’s overall power.²²⁶ Specifically, Copeland argues that parity plays a much greater role in the declining power’s ability to launch a major war

²²² Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 188.

²²³ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 188-191.

²²⁴ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

²²⁵ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

²²⁶ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000), 15.

in multi-polar systems because a multi-polar system includes a greater number of potential adversaries for the declining power to defeat.²²⁷ Additionally, this separation of military power from other types of power means that the rising power could initiate a war once it becomes military dominant, even if the falling hegemon is still the most likely aggressor.²²⁸

However, preventative war is not the only possible mechanism for power transition. Ciwan M. Can and Anson Chan argue that historical cases of dominant powers launching preventative wars against rising great powers cease to exist after the onset of the Nuclear Revolution.²²⁹ Can and Chan argue that this historical trend is the result of nuclear weapons significantly increasing the costs of major war and decreasing the likelihood of victory through the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD). As a result, modern great powers will have to limit their competition to fighting for relative strategic advantage and influence instead of through kinetic conflict.²³⁰

Critique of Power Transition Theory

Although power transition theory helps fill the gap in hegemonic stability theory regarding what happens when a rising power challenges a hegemon, there are two holes in this theory. The first has to do with how PTT describes parity. Organski and Kugler provide a numerical measure: a rising power reaches parity with a hegemonic power when it possesses

²²⁷ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000), 16-17.

²²⁸ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000), 15.

²²⁹ C.M Can and A Chan, "Preventive or Revisionist Challenge During Power Transition? The Case of China–USA Strategic Competition" *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(1) (2022): 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221076646>, 12.

²³⁰ C.M Can and A Chan, "Preventive or Revisionist Challenge During Power Transition? The Case of China–USA Strategic Competition." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(1) (2022): 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221076646>, 12-13.

80% or more of the hegemon's power. Houweling and Siccama emphasize the importance of rate of growth, and Charles J. Koch measures relative power through measurements like SDP, which "estimates the upper bound on the resources a state can sustainably extract" combined with military expenditures.²³¹ However, power transition theory's basis in realism means that it neglects the importance of how the hegemon perceives parity. Copeland does discuss the importance of a hegemon perceiving itself to be in decline, and how that can increase the likelihood of a preemptive war,²³² but he does not address the broader influence of perception or misperception on hegemonic behavior. For example, a hegemon could believe that a rising power is closer to parity than it is, or underestimate a rising power's capabilities. Power transition theory currently has no method for measuring the influence of perception on parity, or how perception affects hegemonic behavior during the beginnings of a potential power transition.

Second, PTT's predictions for hegemonic behavior provides limited options for a challenged hegemon. Either the hegemon will launch a preemptive war, attempt to invest greater resources in maintaining its position, or accept the change in the status quo. However, as Can and Chan point out, these options ignore the limits placed on major war by fear of nuclear war. It is much less clear in this nuclear context, how a hegemon would approach a power transition, and how much the presence of nuclear weapons would influence its willingness to accept or manipulate the risk involved in a confrontation over the world order. These two critiques ensure that power transition theory must be used in concert with hegemonic stability theory, but also along with other frameworks to explain hegemonic behavior in the twenty-first century.

²³¹ Charles J. Koch, "Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 95.

²³² Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000), 16.

The Framework of Hegemonic Order Theory

Hegemonic order theory arises from the common principles of hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory. Nexon and Neumann aptly summarize these principles, laid out below in table 2.6, in their article “Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account.”²³³ First, hierarchical orders with one superordinate actor at the top are the most common system-wide equilibrium in international politics. Second, the ability to order relations among subordinate powers makes a preeminent power a hegemon, and they establish an international order through the provision of goods, such as security and economic trading systems. Third, change in hegemonic hierarchies occurs when there are shifts in relative economic and military capabilities of states. Fourth, revisionism arises from emerging powers that are dissatisfied with the “status quo.” If the hegemon fails to change the system to accommodate the revisionist power, it will become increasingly likely to challenge the hegemon. Fifth, this challenge can result in war if the hegemon launches a preventive war, and the victor in that war will determine the hierarchy and nature of the international order.²³⁴

²³³ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, “Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

²³⁴ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, “Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686, 664.

Table 2.6: Basic Principles of Hegemonic Stability and Power Transition Theories

1. Hierarchical orders led by a preeminent power are the most common international system
 - a. Enduring cycles of rising and declining hegemonic powers constitute world politics
2. A Hegemon has the ability to order relations among subordinate powers
 - a. Hegemons establish an international order through the provision of goods
3. Power Transitions occur when there are shifts in states' relative economic and military capabilities
4. Revisionism arises from emerging powers that are dissatisfied with the status quo
5. Revisionism can result in war

Source: Adapted from "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account"²³⁵

Nexon and Neuman also highlight the role hegemonic overextension can play in the relative difference in power between a hegemon and a rising power. They argue that overextension can degrade a hegemon's position.²³⁶ This concept is further explored by Robert Gilpin and Victoria Tin-bor Hui. The core idea of hegemonic overexpansion is that eventually a hegemon will encounter both increasing costs and diminishing returns from further expansion. Expansion then becomes overexpansion, and the conquering state will bring about its own ruin when the marginal costs of expansion exceed the marginal benefits. In basic terms, the hegemon expends more blood and treasure than it earns or can replenish by expanding. Hui also argues that the defining cost in over-expansion is the "loss-of-strength gradient," which she defines as "the degree to which a state's military and political power diminishes as the state attempts to influence other states and events farther away from its home base."²³⁷ She argues that this

²³⁵ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686, 664.

²³⁶ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686, 664.

²³⁷ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Towards a dynamic theory of international politics: Insights from comparing ancient China and early modern Europe," *International Organization* 58(1) (2004): 175–205, 177.

gradient ensures that long-distance campaigns will almost always drain the economy of the hegemon, as it will have to invest increasing amounts of resources to maintain its power.²³⁸

This idea of hegemonic overexpansion and these five basic principles undergird what Ikenberry and Nexon call “Hegemonic Order Theory.”²³⁹ They claim this body of theory is the third phase of hegemonic literature. The first phase included the work of Keohane, Krasner, and Snidal, and mainly focused on creating and developing the tenets of hegemonic theory, such as HST.²⁴⁰ The second phase began to examine the “architecture and infrastructure” of hegemony and hegemonic systems, and focused on mechanisms of stabilization and the variables that accounted for stability.²⁴¹ The third phase of interstate-hegemony studies is hegemonic order theory, which Ikenberry and Nexon claim treats the politics of hegemonic orders as important in their own right.

This phase claims to give greater attention to processes at work in hegemonic politics and hegemonic ordering, such as bargaining, contestation, and cooperation.²⁴² More importantly, this phase seeks to study how hegemons themselves view the costs and benefits of a hegemonic system and are affected by their status and the international orders they create.²⁴³ Therefore, hegemonic order theory is important for this study because its dual mechanisms of HST and PTT

²³⁸Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “Towards a dynamic theory of international politics: Insights from comparing ancient China and early modern Europe,” *International Organization* 58(1) (2004): 175–205.

²³⁹ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 399.

²⁴⁰ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 421.

²⁴¹ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 421.

²⁴² John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 398.

²⁴³ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 399.

will allow me to examine U.S. policy in the South China Sea through the lens of stability and transition, shedding light on the United States' changing perceptions and policy motivations in the South China Sea. Additionally, hegemonic order theory is a useful theory for this study because it has specific principles that generate clear, specific, and testable hypotheses.

Hegemonic Order Theory's Framing for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea

In a hegemonic order framework, the United States is the current hegemon of the Liberal World Order. Through its preponderance of military and economic power, it provides public goods to subordinate states in the LWO, including security and capitalist free markets. The Liberal World Order was largely stable because most states in the system felt the benefits of participating in it outweighed the costs of having to bow to U.S. hegemony. Meanwhile, China is the rising, revisionist power in this framework who is dissatisfied with the U.S.-led world order.

Now, there is a debate about whether China is truly a revisionist power. Some scholars like Dr. Paul Smith argue that it is just trying to edit the rules of the Liberal World Order,²⁴⁴ while others like Rush Doshi argue China wants to displace the United States regionally and globally.²⁴⁵ However, what is clear in the South China Sea is that China is attempting to challenge the global maritime order codified in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the United States defends as part of the liberal rules based order.²⁴⁶ Following power

²⁴⁴ Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtvr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoln6o/edit?usp=sharing>.

²⁴⁵ Rush Doshi, 'Introduction' in *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, online edn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi-org.revproxy.brown.edu/10.1093/oso/9780197527917.003.0001>.

²⁴⁶ Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1faziJetlVXsNmTeHkyS5GJxnxIzW85Eq/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=100499727363606636194&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

transition theory, the opportunity for China to attempt a power transition could be in the near future since the power gap between China and the U.S. is rapidly shrinking.²⁴⁷ This attempt at revisionism could lead to conflict if the U.S. launches a preventive war to stop China's rise, or China initiates a conflict to unseat the United States.²⁴⁸ However, where the explanatory power of this theory is weakest is between those final two steps. Either side could launch a war, but major conflict seems unlikely since both countries possess nuclear weapons and are aware that even a conventional war between them would be costly.

However, intense competition is possible in areas where the U.S. perceives its power to be weakest and China feels most dissatisfied with the existing international order. The South China Sea is one such area. China is deeply dissatisfied with the Liberal World Order's stance on the SCS. The costs of adhering to the LWO in the South China Sea are steep, and include China's historic claim to sovereignty over most of the SCS, its ability to exploit the resources within that space, and its prestige in Asia. Meanwhile, the benefits of adhering to the LWO are rights to freedom of navigation in waters China believes it already has sovereign rights over and continued reception of U.S. provided public goods in the region.

Meanwhile, the South China Sea provides the U.S. with a peripheral area to engage in competition with China and employ some of the policies suggested by hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory. The United States might choose to compete with China in the SCS for three significant reasons. First, the United States sees the South China Sea as representative of broader U.S.-China competition and its prestige in Asia. The U.S. has interests in the SCS, but experts like Dr. James Holmes and former policy makers like Former Deputy

²⁴⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381–96, 381.

²⁴⁸ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686, 664.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia argue the SCS has risen in prominence because it symbolizes U.S. resolve, reputation, and success in broader U.S.-China competition.²⁴⁹ Second, the SCS is an area where China has a strategic advantage and has increasingly flexed its maritime capabilities and innovative gray-zone strategies.²⁵⁰ If the United States could stand up to China in this area where it has a geographic disadvantage, then U.S. success would indicate it is not suffering from hegemonic overextension and has maintained its military preponderance. Third, the U.S. can also afford to take a more cautious approach to the South China Sea since it has less stake in the status of the various SCS territorial and maritime claims than in other regional issues, such as the continued independence of Taiwan. These lower stakes mean the U.S. can both experiment with how it confronts China without losing significant face on the world stage. However, hegemonic order theory provides no specific strategies for how such a policy should be pursued.

Critique of Hegemonic Order Theory

Although hegemonic order theory claims to examine the role of hegemons themselves, it still under emphasizes the role of the hegemon. Ikenberry and Nexon highlight this point in their article, and claim that “hegemonic-order theories should aim to take the interaction between international orders, hegemons, and hegemonic ordering much more seriously.”²⁵¹ However, the

²⁴⁹ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoln6o/edit?usp=sharing>.

²⁵⁰ Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024; Ryan D. Martinson and Conor Kennedy, “Using the Enemy to Train the Troops,” *China Brief* 22, no. 6. <https://jamestown.org/program/using-the-enemy-to-train-the-troops-beijings-new-approach-to-prepare-its-navy-for-war/>.

²⁵¹ John G. Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders.” *Security studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 395–421, 418.

hegemon-shaped hole in this hegemonic theory raises questions about hegemonic order theory's ability to explain or predict how a hegemon will behave. In this existing framework, the hegemon is not given the flexibility to test the rising power, nor does this theory recommend any specific strategies for how the hegemon might maintain its power. Additionally, there is no provision in hegemonic order theory for a multi-layered international order. This gap in existing literature leads to questions like: Will the rising power still attempt to overthrow the hegemon if it is only dissatisfied with one part of the global order? Finally, hegemonic order theory does not seem to account for the limitations placed on interstate competition or conflict by nuclear weapons.

Therefore, this body of theory must be tested to see if it can be used to comprehensively explain hegemonic behavior. It then must be applied in a framework with theories that focus specifically on strategies for how a hegemon should maintain its dominance. These theories include offensive realism and structural liberalism, but also a strategy that is rarely used with a hegemonic focus: brinkmanship.

BRINKMANSHIP: A POTENTIAL HEGEMONIC STRATEGY

Brinkmanship, or the threat that leaves something to chance, is different from the previous theories discussed in this chapter because it is a strategy of coercion rather than a predictive theory. Brinkmanship does not explain why a state would become involved in a region or crisis, but instead describes how a state might act in pursuit of its goals. It was first proposed

by Thomas Schelling in a 1959 RAND document called “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance.”²⁵² In this document, Schelling defined brinkmanship as:

The deliberate operation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control. It is the tactic of deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, just because it's being out of hand may be intolerable to the other party and force his accommodation.²⁵³

As the literature on brinkmanship expanded, the term’s definition was condensed and it is now commonly defined as “a competition in risk-taking or manipulating the chance of mutual disaster.”²⁵⁴ Yet, no matter the exact wording of the definition, the core idea of brinkmanship has remained the same: it is a coercive strategy for generating credible leverage through the purposeful use of risk.²⁵⁵

BRINKMANSHIP: THE BASICS

At its core, Schelling’s brinkmanship is a strategy meant to address the problems states encounter while competing under a nuclear shadow.²⁵⁶ As Matthew Kroenig recounts in his book *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters*, nuclear weapons complicate interstate competition. When two nuclear states both possess a secure second strike capability, where their nuclear forces have been hardened or hidden well enough that they can

²⁵² Thomas C. Schelling, “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959. https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html.

²⁵³ Thomas C. Schelling, “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959. https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html, 18.

²⁵⁴ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 15.

²⁵⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959, 4; Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 13.

²⁵⁶ Matthew, Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016, 20.

still be launched against an adversary even after a first strike, they exist in a state of mutually assured destruction. Since neither state is assured that it could defend itself against a nuclear attack, logically neither will strike first and light the fire that will consume itself and its rival.²⁵⁷

Now, deterrence theorists debate whether nuclear weapons truly deter international war. Scholars such as Kenneth Waltz argue that because deterrence is strong and “depends on what one can do, not on what one will do,” the likelihood of war significantly decreases between nuclear weapons states, especially because the victim of a nuclear strike has no ability to control the damage it receives.²⁵⁸ However, other scholars like Glenn Snyder argue that nuclear weapons create a stability-instability paradox, where the effect nuclear weapons have on conflicts short of major war is ultimately unclear. Essentially, even if nuclear weapons do reduce the risk of major war, they do not prevent lower level conflicts, like proxy wars.²⁵⁹ As Robert Jervis explains, nuclear weapons make international relations stable at the level of major war because of the threat of possible escalation to all-out nuclear war. However, this stability leaves each side in a conflict free to engage in provocative behavior, even to the point of military action at lower levels of violence. Thus, international relations at these lower levels become more unstable.²⁶⁰

Whether or not nuclear weapons stabilize international relations, the dynamics of MAD still present nuclear weapons states with a credibility problem. States want to compete and coerce each other, even with nuclear weapons present. Yet, one nuclear armed state cannot

²⁵⁷ Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016, 20.

²⁵⁸ Kenneth Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review* 84 (September 1990): 731-45, 740.

²⁵⁹ Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror” in *Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury, San Francisco: Chandler (1965).

²⁶⁰ Robert Jervis, “Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn’t Matter,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>, 619.

believably threaten another nuclear state with nuclear forces, not when both states know any use of nuclear weapons would result in their mutual destruction.²⁶¹ Schelling presented his initial conception of brinkmanship, which he further developed in two books *The Strategy of Conflict*²⁶² and *Arms and Influence*,²⁶³ as an answer to this problem. He argued that brinkmanship can be used to explain how states accidentally engage in conflict despite their best intentions, and why the manipulation of risk in a world with nuclear weapons is a valuable coercive strategy.²⁶⁴

According to Schelling, a state can use various measures, such as trip-wire forces or issue linkages, to credibly signal its resolve during a crisis, and show that it may be forced to engage in conflict, even involving nuclear weapons, despite its intentions.²⁶⁵ For example, the United States could not credibly tell the Soviet Union that it would intervene with conventional or nuclear forces to defend West Berlin during the Cold War. The Soviet Union had every reason to believe that the U.S. would not want to trade U.S. lives to protect or recapture half of a conquered enemy capital an ocean away. However, the small garrison of American soldiers in Berlin represented a trip-wire that would take the decision out of U.S. hands and force the U.S. to take action. If, as Shelling gruesomely put it, the Soviet Union invaded Berlin “whether we wished to or not, we could not fail to be involved if we had more troops being run over by the Soviet Army than we

²⁶¹ Matthew, Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016, 20.

²⁶² Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Rev. ed, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

²⁶³ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

²⁶⁴ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 91.

²⁶⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959, 4; Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 1.

could afford to see defeated.”²⁶⁶ Essentially, those troops were stationed in Berlin to die “heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that action cannot stop there.”²⁶⁷ Schelling argued that if the USSR invaded Berlin and killed American soldiers, the U.S. would have no choice but to respond with military force, and perhaps even escalate it to nuclear war if things got out of hand. Through stationing these trip-wire forces in Berlin, the U.S. showed its commitment to defend the city by raising the risk of uncontrolled conflict escalation if the Soviet Union invaded, coercing the USSR into giving up on an invasion of West Berlin.

Despite the enduring power and rationalist theory²⁶⁸ behind Schelling’s initial theory of brinkmanship,²⁶⁹ it is not without its limitations. Several scholars have since critiqued the theory as overly broad and vague, and have sought to amend and specify mechanisms within Schelling’s initial idea. For example, Robert Powell argues that there is no bargaining advantage in the preemptive use of force. Based on an analysis of the assumptions underlying two general theories of strategic nuclear deterrence, Powell argues that the nature of the nuclear threats inherent in each of these theories differs, and these two types of threats contain different implicit escalatory processes.²⁷⁰ These different escalatory processes mean scholars must differentiate

²⁶⁶ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 47.

²⁶⁷ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 48.

²⁶⁸ Maja Zehfuss describes “Rationalism” as the term used to describe traditional approaches to international relations, such as neorealism and neoliberalism, in opposition to constructivism. Rationalists are a range of assumptions about the nature of international politics, such as the notion that state actors are unitary and rational, social phenomena may be explained in the same way as the natural world, and that facts and values are clearly separated. They approach international relations with an assumption that instrumental rationality is crucial, hence the term ‘rationalism’ in Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

²⁶⁹ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 15.

²⁷⁰ Robert Powell, “The Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Nuclear Deterrence,” *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 75–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2150861>, 76.

between two models of brinkmanship because brinkmanship's leverage derives from the credible potential for accidents or irrationality on the part of one of the actors.²⁷¹ The first model is Schelling's "risk model," which only applies when escalation is irrational and uncontrolled. The second is Powell's own "punishment model," which applies when leaders remain in control of escalation. According to Powell, the choice to escalate the conflict, such as launching a nuclear attack, is rational when a "state believes that it has already suffered such an attack and that its society has been destroyed" and it launches in response to punish its adversary.²⁷²

Additionally, concepts like escalation and misperception are critical to understanding the mechanisms of brinkmanship and how states generate risk in a crisis. Escalation theory explains the mechanisms of how a crisis can spiral out of control despite the intentions of parties involved. Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott²⁷³ break these schools down into two groups: one that sees escalation as the result of deliberate choices, and another that sees it as a natural phenomenon where war gets out of hand due to accidents. This latter school often works in tandem with concepts of perception and misperception because a leader's mistake can lead to inadvertent escalation.²⁷⁴ In particular, Pauly and McDermott highlight how Robert Jervis shows in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*²⁷⁵ that a leader's misperception of an

²⁷¹ Robert Powell, "The Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Nuclear Deterrence," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 75–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2150861>, 80.

²⁷² Robert Powell, "The Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Nuclear Deterrence," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 75–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2150861>, 85.

²⁷³ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 20; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

²⁷⁴ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 15.

²⁷⁵ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

adversary's interests, military signals, willingness to escalate, and own rationality can lead to escalation. From this point of view, brinkmanship is as much about an actor's ability to manipulate the other side's perception of its intentions as the risk of the situation itself.²⁷⁶

Schelling himself does not differentiate between these two schools in brinkmanship theory, and it is possible that both versions of escalation could play a part in brinkmanship. After all, it is not unreasonable to imagine that risk could be generated from engaging in both types of escalation. However, Pauly and McDermott rightly point out that most conceptions of nuclear brinkmanship leave out the importance of human decisions.²⁷⁷ By adding the lens of psychology to brinkmanship theory, they show how human emotions, irrationality, and potential misjudgements can generate risk, and can even make brinkmanship a more useful strategy. After all, there is no greater uncertainty than not knowing how an opponent might react.

Brinkmanship's Predictions for U.S Policy in the South China Sea

Brinkmanship is not often discussed in relation to hegemony. Yet, brinkmanship could be a powerful tool for a hegemon, especially in peripheral areas. First, a hegemon can employ brinkmanship to show its commitment to a region or resolve over an issue. Hegemons have many interests, and the United States as a hegemon has a habit of becoming involved in many different areas, conflicts, and issues all around the globe.²⁷⁸ Naturally some of these issues are seen as more important than others, both by the hegemon and by other states. Therefore, if the hegemon

²⁷⁶ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 20; Robert Jervis, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 201.

²⁷⁷ Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51.

²⁷⁸ Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

is faced with a region or issue where it is perceived as having less vital interests, it can employ brinkmanship to signal that it is invested and willing to risk crisis escalation over this issue.

Second, brinkmanship can be used to disprove any credibility issues the hegemon might face over an issue or region. The hegemon is at a disadvantage in the periphery because it by definition has less stake and interests in the periphery than the states present in that region. One way for a hegemon to offset that disadvantage could be to risk some “skin in the game” over an ally in a peripheral area that feels undervalued. The hegemon displaying resolve over a region that it was seen to be ignoring can enhance its credibility. The hegemon being willing to risk itself can also stabilize the international order by showing the world that the hegemon is willing to defend its values. Therefore, brinkmanship can be an important strategy for displaying resolve and commitment over peripheral issues.

Finally, the hegemon could employ brinkmanship in an area it views as peripheral to its interests in order to test the resolve, capabilities, and perceptions of a rising power. The hegemon would be able to see how quickly the rising power is willing to escalate a potential conflict with the hegemon, and as well as assess how strong the rising power believes it is relative to the hegemon. For example, if the rising power does not see itself as close to parity with the hegemon, it is likely to avoid fast escalation and much more likely to bow out of a conflict.

As mentioned previously brinkmanship is a theory of coercion, thus it explains a state’s methods and does not predict why the U.S. would change its policy towards the South China Sea. So, if the United States as a hegemon was engaging in brinkmanship with China to display its resolve over precepts of the Liberal World Order threatened in the SCS, I would expect to see three trends in U.S. behavior. First, the U.S. can employ hand tying measures to show its resolve to defend the Philippines and other U.S. interests, such as freedom of navigation, in the South

China Sea. One example could be placing trip-wire forces somewhere near the South China Sea to deter China from taking action against U.S. allies or interests. A potential example of such trip-wire forces in the SCS could be U.S. rotational forces stationed at nine Philippine bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.²⁷⁹ These bases and their locations are highlighted in figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Philippine Bases Where U.S. Troops Can Be Stationed Under the EDCA



Source: ABS-CBN, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/04/05/23/fast-facts-philippine-bases-us-soldiers-can-use>

²⁷⁹ Brad Lendon, “US Gains Military Access to Philippine Bases Close to Taiwan and South China Sea,” CNN, April 4, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/04/asia/us-philippines-military-base-access-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>; David, Vergun, “New EDCA Sites Named in the Philippines,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 3, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3350297/new-edca-sites-named-in-the-philippines/>.

These troops would not be able to stop China from taking Philippine territory in the South China Sea, but their presence signals that the U.S. might have no choice but to escalate an SCS crisis if U.S. troops are caught in the crossfire of a Chinese military action. Similarly, the U.S. could employ issue-linkages. This strategy would entail connecting SCS issues, such as China's excessive maritime claims and aggressive military behavior, to issues the U.S. is known to prioritize, such as Taiwan. Linking these issues, and saying that what happens in the South China Sea will affect what happens to Taiwan and reflect on the United States' willingness and ability to protect its allies, ties the United States' hands because the U.S. cannot abandon its stated interests in the SCS without risking other areas where it has vital interests.

Second, there would also likely be an increase in shows of strength, force, and capabilities in the SCS. These actions could take the form of naval drills with allies, or an increase in the number of freedom of navigation operations in or around the South China Sea. Such drills and operations would increase the U.S. presence in the region and enhance the risk that an accident could lead to escalation if China allows its navy to behave aggressively or recklessly while U.S. ships or assets are in the area. These drills would also demonstrate U.S. capabilities, and its resolve to defend its allies in Southeast Asia.

Finally, there would likely be an increase in deterrent statements from the U.S. to China. These could appear in official policy documents, conversations between leaders, or in speeches made by prominent U.S. officials. For example, in 2015 it appeared China was considering militarizing Scarborough Shoal, which they had stolen from the Philippines three years prior. In response, President Obama warned President Xi on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit that Scarborough was a red line for the United States and building a base on this reef would

negatively impact Sino-U.S. relations.²⁸⁰ This statement was a clear, deterrent threat from the U.S. to China, and it appears to have been effective, as China has not built an artificial island base on Scarborough Shoal as of April 2024.²⁸¹

Critique of Brinkmanship

The largest issue with existing literature on brinkmanship is that it is heavily influenced by Cold War dynamics. This influence is not unreasonable given that Schelling invented this theory during the Cold War, but authors' constant return to the Cuban Missile Crisis as the quintessential example of nuclear brinkmanship reveals a limiting pattern in how scholars have approached identifying and examining brinkmanship crises.²⁸² It seems an unspoken assumption that brinkmanship relationships must contain Cold War dynamics, namely open and hostile competition between two nuclear powers. However, the Cold War is over, and even if some authors²⁸³ are correct to haringer the beginning of a new cold war with China, it is unclear if this second cold war would follow the same patterns of state behavior and competition. Therefore, it

²⁸⁰ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225.

²⁸¹ The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative's page on Scarborough Shoal is updated frequently, and the current status of the shoal can be found here: <https://amti.csis.org/scarborough-shoal/>.

²⁸² See: Oles M. Smolansky, "MOSCOW AND THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS: REFLECTIONS ON KHRUSHCHEV'S «BRINKMANSHIP», *Politico (Pavia, Italy)* 33, no. 3 (1968): 509–526; Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis", *International Security* 10, no. 1 (1985): 137–163; Stephen J. Cimbala, "Behaviour Modification and the Cuban Missile Crisis: From Brinkmanship to Disaster Avoidance", *Arms Control* 13, no. 2 (1992): 252–284; Alice L. George, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: the Threshold of Nuclear War*. New York: Routledge, 2013; Avinash K. Dixit, David McAdams, and Susan Skeath, "We Haven't Got But One More Day: The Cuban Missile Crisis as a Dynamic Chicken Game", *SSRN* (2019).

²⁸³ See: Robert. D. Kaplan, "A New Cold War Has Begun," *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>; Yukon Huang, "he U.S.-China Trade War Has Become a Cold War," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 16, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/16/u.s.-china-trade-war-has-become-cold-war-pub-85352>; Seth Schindler, Illias Alman, Jessica DiCarlo, et al, "The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks," *Geopolitics* (2023). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432>.

is important to readjust these dynamics to accurately reflect current global power dynamics, and look critically at all modern crises to see if they contain characteristics of brinkmanship, such as U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea Disputes.

Additionally, there are few examples of brinkmanship being framed as a hegemonic strategy, let alone examined in a peripheral area. Brinkmanship is usually examined in cases where states are attempting to coerce each other over perceived vital interests, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Berlin Crisis,²⁸⁴ and the Taiwan Strait Crisis.²⁸⁵ This pattern of scholarship makes sense, as it would seem foolish for a state to engage in a competition of risk over areas or issues they can afford to negotiate over, or even lose. However, as examined above, brinkmanship dynamics can be used to display resolve even in areas not seen as directly vital, something existing literature has not truly examined.

Finally, brinkmanship as a nuclear theory does not predict how state behavior will change if the brink is conventional war. Yet, it is possible that when two states are competing in a peripheral area, the threat that leaves something to chance is not necessarily nuclear war. Although if the two competing states both possess nuclear weapons any conflict could eventually escalate to that level. Instead, the risk is starting a conventional war, which leads to questions about how this change in stakes affects the rate of escalation. It could make the slope of escalation steeper and quicker since states might struggle to ever engage in potentially world-ending nuclear war where everyone would ultimately lose, but could be much quicker to engage in conventional war where they might still be able to achieve some of their goals. It also raises questions about the instability-stability paradox, and how brinkmanship functions if that

²⁸⁴ For example, see: Stephen G Walker, "Bargaining over Berlin: A Re-Analysis of the First and Second Berlin Crisis," *The Journal of Politics* 44, no. 1 (1982): 152–64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2130288?seq=1>.

²⁸⁵ Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 87–123. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2626754>.

paradox is strong for peripheral reasons. In order to answer these questions, brinkmanship must be tested in a peripheral area under competition, like the South China Sea, to see if it can explain state behavior. If brinkmanship can explain U.S. behavior towards China in the South China Sea, then this study will show that brinkmanship can be employed in new areas of state competition. However, if brinkmanship dynamics are present, but the applicability of the nuclear framing of the theory is questionable, then perhaps a new version of brinkmanship dynamics focused on the risk of a devastating conventional war needs to be created.

CONCLUSION

The role of hegemony in international relations has traditionally been analyzed through two main bodies of literature. The first body of theory is composed of the fundamental international relations paradigms of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The second body of scholarly work is composed of hegemonic literature. However, both of these bodies of literature, and the specific theories within them, fail to comprehensively explain changes in hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global world order, or the changes in U.S. policy towards China in peripheral areas like the South China Sea over the last twenty years. Fundamental IR theories are too broad in their assumptions, and their sub-variants often neglect key factors required when analyzing a complex and multifaceted phenomena like hegemonic behavior and changing world orders.

Meanwhile, despite hegemon being in the name, hegemonic theories only provide limited options for hegemonic behavior during power transitions that do not account for mitigating factors, like nuclear weapons. The applicability of these bodies of literature to the case of U.S.

policy towards China in the SCS, and their ability to explain why the U.S. has adopted potentially risk and escalatory policies it has in peripheral areas like the South China Sea, is ultimately unclear. Therefore, the theories with the most explanatory power for hegemonic behavior, offensive realism, structural liberalism, and hegemonic order theory, must be tested for their applicability to this case. Based on that analysis, if one of these theories does not possess satisfactory individual explanatory power, multiple of these theories must be combined into a new framework with the theory of brinkmanship to fully analyze all the dynamics motivating the U.S.'s policy towards China and the driving forces behind hegemonic behavior when it faces a challenger.

In the following chapter, I provide historical background for my case of the South China Sea. This history is crucial to understanding why studying U.S. policy in this region helps explain larger dynamics in U.S.-China relations, and hegemonic behavior during times of change in the world order. I begin with a brief overview of U.S.-China relations, before explaining the South China Sea sovereignty disputes and their importance in international relations. I then summarize the United States' involvement in the South China Sea from 1800 to September 2023, with specific focus given to U.S. policy from 2000-September 2023 in order to provide the reader with necessary historical and political context for my empirical work in chapter four and five.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AMIDST THE CHANGING TIDES OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

In the past we have been much more tolerant about China's approach or actions in the South China Sea, because China just really didn't have the national capacities to make it worth our while...But now it's seen to be a reflection of broader Chinese aspirations. And in that case it's not tolerable.

—Chad Sbragia, interview with author

This chapter explains the recent history of U.S-China relations and U.S. policies and behavior in the South China Sea to provide important historical context for this study. In 2023, China is seen as a serious strategic competitor to the United States.²⁸⁶ Policy experts like Dr. Michael Swaine and Ambassador Freeman agree that curtailing, containing, and “beating China” is one of the few issues with true bilateral support in the U.S.²⁸⁷ However, this zero-sum mindset is a fairly recent phenomenon, and until the 2010s the U.S. actually sought to cooperatively engage with China, including in the South China Sea. Therefore, examining how U.S. policy towards China concurrently changed with the United States’ approach towards the SCS can provide necessary context for my empirical chapters. A brief examination of the history of U.S-China relations will also further demonstrate why the SCS is a good case for a study examining changes in this relationship, and hegemonic behavior during times of change in the global world order.

This chapter begins with a broad overview of the history of U.S-China relations after World War II. This section examines key trends and events that influenced the United States’

²⁸⁶ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Q3Y1zJGbcNx2UX0WynUsratl_NGfXuBiAEql8FcPyqA/edit?usp=sharing.

²⁸⁷ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024; Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

grand strategy towards China from 1949 to September 2023. The following section briefly reviews the South China Sea disputes and their importance for international relations. The chapter then ends with a review of the major trends in U.S policy regarding the South China Sea, with specific focus given to the major changes from 2000 to September 2023.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICA’S CHINA POLICIES: CONTAINMENT, COOPERATION, AND COMPETITION

The U.S. and China have a long, complicated relationship, marked by cooperation, competition, and wariness about the interests and intentions of the other side.²⁸⁸ The current competitive and antagonistic state of U.S.-China relations are the result of ideology, domestic concerns, and larger geopolitical factors that drove the world’s two largest economies towards opposing sides of key issues. Therefore, the history of U.S. foreign policy towards China is not a straightforward descent into strategic competition, but can instead be broken up into four separate periods: Containment (1949-1972),²⁸⁹ Optimistic Engagement (1973-2001),²⁹⁰ Cooperation Under Growing Suspicion (2002-2012),²⁹¹ and Increasing Competition (2012-September 2023). Major events in U.S-China relations throughout these four periods are outlined in figure 3.1

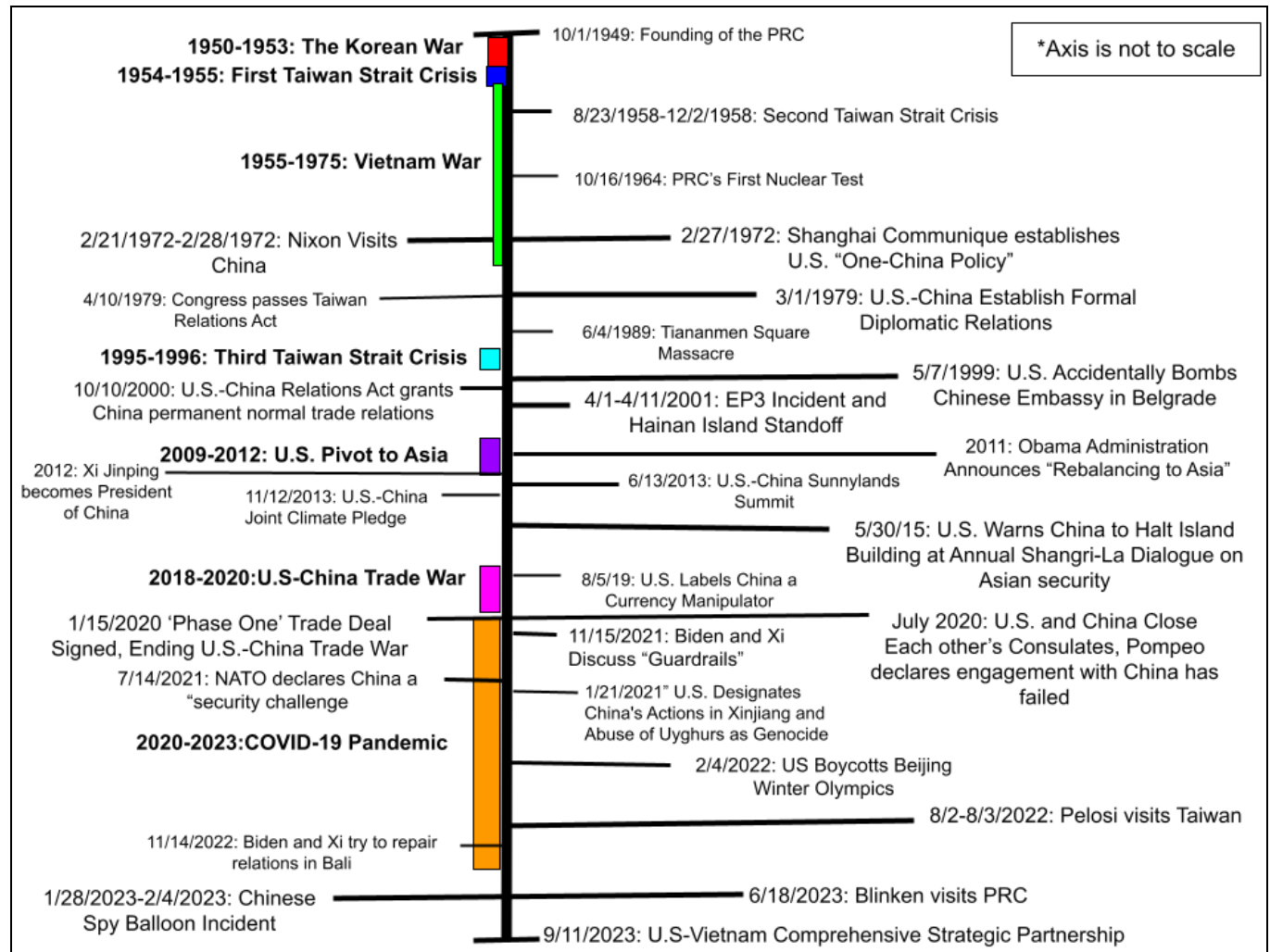
²⁸⁸ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024.

²⁸⁹ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 149.

²⁹⁰ Sean. R Liedman calls this period “Accelerating But Interrupted Engagement,” but I use the title “Optimistic Engagement” because the U.S. was optimistic that engagement with China would lead to democratization and mold China into a constructive contributor in existing international systems, despite incidents like the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre.

²⁹¹ I end this period in 2008 at the beginning of the Global Financial Crises, when certain Chinese policymakers began to question the longevity of U.S. and Western Dominance and when the Obama Administration began its “rebalance/pivot” to Asia, which led to a shift in U.S. focus to East and Southeast Asia.

Figure 3.1: Timeline of U.S.-China Relations 1949-September 2023



Source: Author²⁹²

²⁹² Based on information from: Yanzhong Huang, "China: Year in Review 2023," Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-year-review-2023>; "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>; Erin Monroe, rep., *U.S.-China Relations: A Brief Historical Perspective* (U.S.-China Policy Foundation, August 2014), <https://uscpcf.org/v3/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/backgrounder-on-US-China-relations.pdf>; I. Richard C. Bush, rep., "The United States Security Partnership with Taiwan" (Brookings Institute, July 16, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/fp_20160713_taiwan_alliance.pdf.

CONTAINMENT (1949-1972) AND OPTIMISTIC ENGAGEMENT (1973-2001)

As shown in figure 3.2, the United States' containment policy towards the People's Republic of China lasted from the PRC's creation in 1949 until President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. This period of U.S.-China relations was largely defined by the Cold War. For example, after the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the United States worked to isolate the People's Republic of China and strengthen its relations with the Republic of China now based in Taiwan.²⁹³ Similarly, the PRC's intervention to protect Communist North Korea in the Korean War hardened U.S. policy towards the PRC. With 36,574 U.S. theater deaths,²⁹⁴ 1,313,000 South Korean casualties, including a million civilians, and a Chinese loss of 900,000 men,²⁹⁵ it is not surprising this conflict led to tense and hostile relations between the U.S. and China. On the U.S. side, this war led the U.S. to adopt an explicit containment policy against China,²⁹⁶ which included signing a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan in 1954.²⁹⁷ However, as Ambassador Freeman recounts, in the 1970s:

The United States wakes up and realizes that the Sino-Soviet Alliance is no more, and tries to enlist China in the containment policy of the Soviet Union, and does so successfully in what became an Entente, meaning a limited partnership for limited purposes.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Hsiao-Ting, Lin, "U.S.-Taiwan Military Diplomacy Revisited: Chiang Kai-Shek, *Baituan*, and the 1954 Mutual Defense Pact," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (2013): 971–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26376504>.

²⁹⁴ "U.S. Military Casualties - Korean War Casualty Summary," *Defense Casualty Analysis System*, April 11, 2024. <https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/app/conflictCasualties/korea/koreaSum>.

²⁹⁵ Bae-ho Hahn, Young Ick Lew, and Ki-baek Li, "The Korean War," *Britannica*, February 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea/The-Korean-War>.

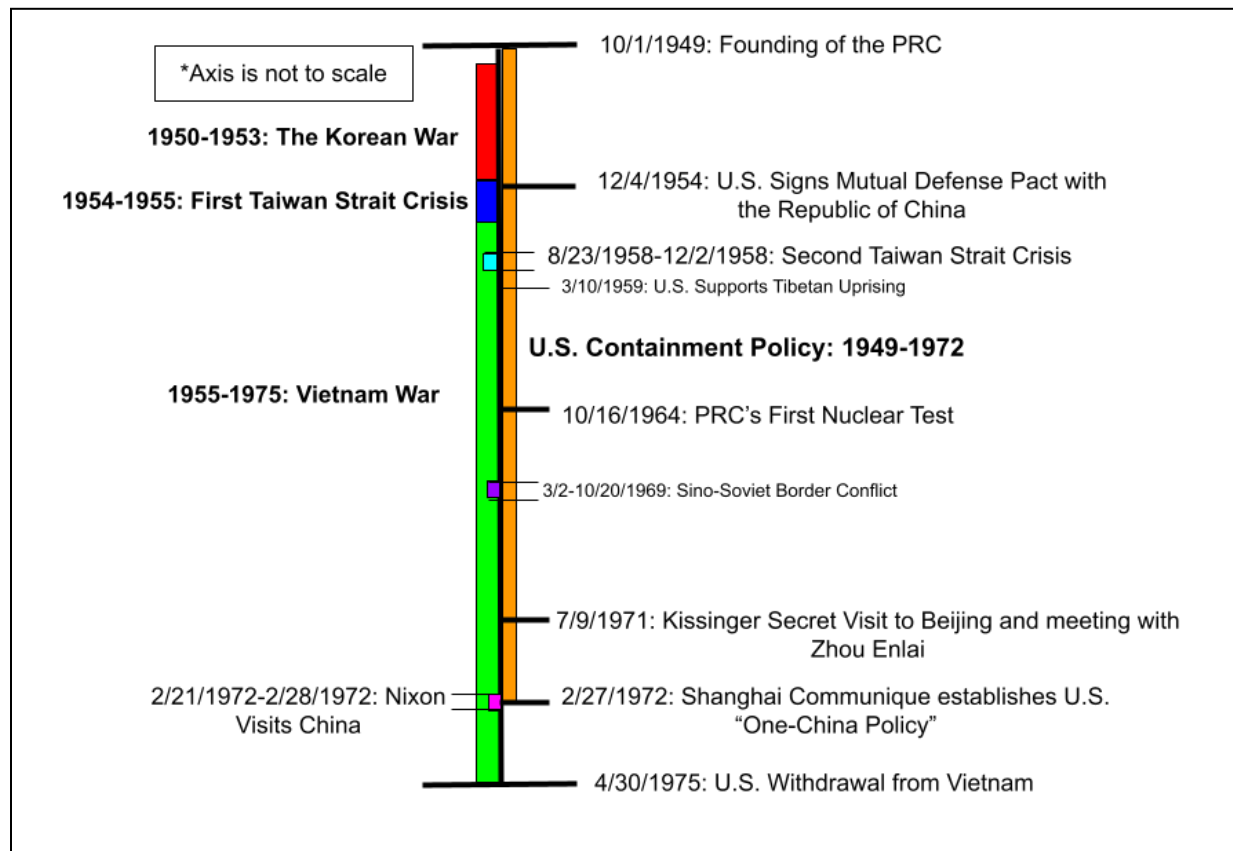
²⁹⁶ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 148.

²⁹⁷ Hsiao-Ting, Lin, "U.S.-Taiwan Military Diplomacy Revisited: Chiang Kai-Shek, *Baituan*, and the 1954 Mutual Defense Pact," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (2013): 971–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26376504>.

²⁹⁸ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

This strategic realignment included President Nixon’s historic visit to China to meet Mao Zedong in 1972,²⁹⁹ and U.S. formal recognition of the PRC and normalized relations between the two countries in 1978.³⁰⁰

Figure 3.2: Timeline of U.S.-China Relations During Containment (1949-1972)



Source: Author³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ “Nixon’s Trip to China,” Nixon’s Trip to China | Richard Nixon Museum and Library, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/nixons-trip-china>.

³⁰⁰ MILESTONES: 1977–1980,” U.S. Department of State, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/china-policy>.

³⁰¹ Based on information from: Yanzhong Huang, “China: Year in Review 2023,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-year-review-2023>; “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>; <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/>; “The United States Security Partnership with Taiwan” (Brookings Institute, July 16, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/fp_20160713_taiwan_alliance.pdf.

A period of optimistic engagement followed this formal recognition. As displayed in figure 3.3, this normalization of U.S-China relations allowed for increased military, political, and economic engagement with China.³⁰² U.S. policy during this period was largely guided by U.S. policy makers' belief that it was in the best interest of the United States to bring the PRC into the U.S.-led Liberal World Order, so the Clinton administration worked to facilitate China's entry into global political and economic institutions throughout the 1990s, ultimately facilitating Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001.³⁰³

Although this period from 1949-2001 largely involved a gradual warming of U.S.-China relations, the legacy of these first few decades continues to influence U.S-China relations today. As Dr. Paul Heer explains, the CCP still interprets U.S. efforts to “minimize their power, wealth, and influence relative to ours within East Asia” as a containment strategy,³⁰⁴ and the United States' relationship with Taiwan, established during this period, is still a major point of contention in U.S-China relations.³⁰⁵ Additionally, even during Optimistic Engagement, the two countries continued to disagree over issues like democratization, human rights, and Taiwan.

Additionally, policy choices and behavior on both sides ensured that their initial adversarial relationship was never truly forgotten. American optimism about China was challenged by events like the Chinese Communist Party's brutal repression of the Tiananmen

³⁰² Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 150-152.

³⁰³ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 150-152.

³⁰⁴ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pRpqUlbl7xI_WGBgWkPdGF7tD6vQaJvfUwo2AIIcvZ8/edit?usp=sharing.

³⁰⁵ For a discussion of the issue of Taiwan in U.S-China relations, see: “Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait,” International Crisis Group, October 27, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/taiwan-strait-china/333-preventing-war-taiwan-strait>; Ryan Hass et al., “An American Perspective on the Role of Taiwan in US-China Relations,” Brookings, July 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-american-perspective-on-the-role-of-taiwan-in-us-china-relations/>.

Square Demonstrations in 1989, and by Chinese behavior during the 2001 Ep-3 Incident. During this incident, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) J08 fighter jet conducted risky maneuvers to try and force a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft off course, resulting in mid-air collision. The accident killed the Chinese pilot and forced the U.S. aircraft to land on Hainan Island, where they were detained by the Chinese for eleven days.³⁰⁶ On the Chinese side, the United States' continued support of the R.O.C. on Taiwan, exemplified by President Reagan's Six Assurances,³⁰⁷ led to a Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in the 1990s and Chinese perceptions that the United States was "reneging" on good-faith negotiations. The PRC was also offended by the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.³⁰⁸ These policy choices and resentments laid the seeds of competition for future U.S.-China relations.

These problems also ensured that the U.S. continued to be wary of China throughout these first two periods, as shown by 2001 U.S. Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review. This review claims that while the U.S. is unlikely to face a proper competitor in the near future, China has the potential to become a future competitor because "China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages." The review suggests that the U.S. make China a useful partner and bring it in to LWO to prevent this challenge,³⁰⁹ and this

³⁰⁶ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 151-152.

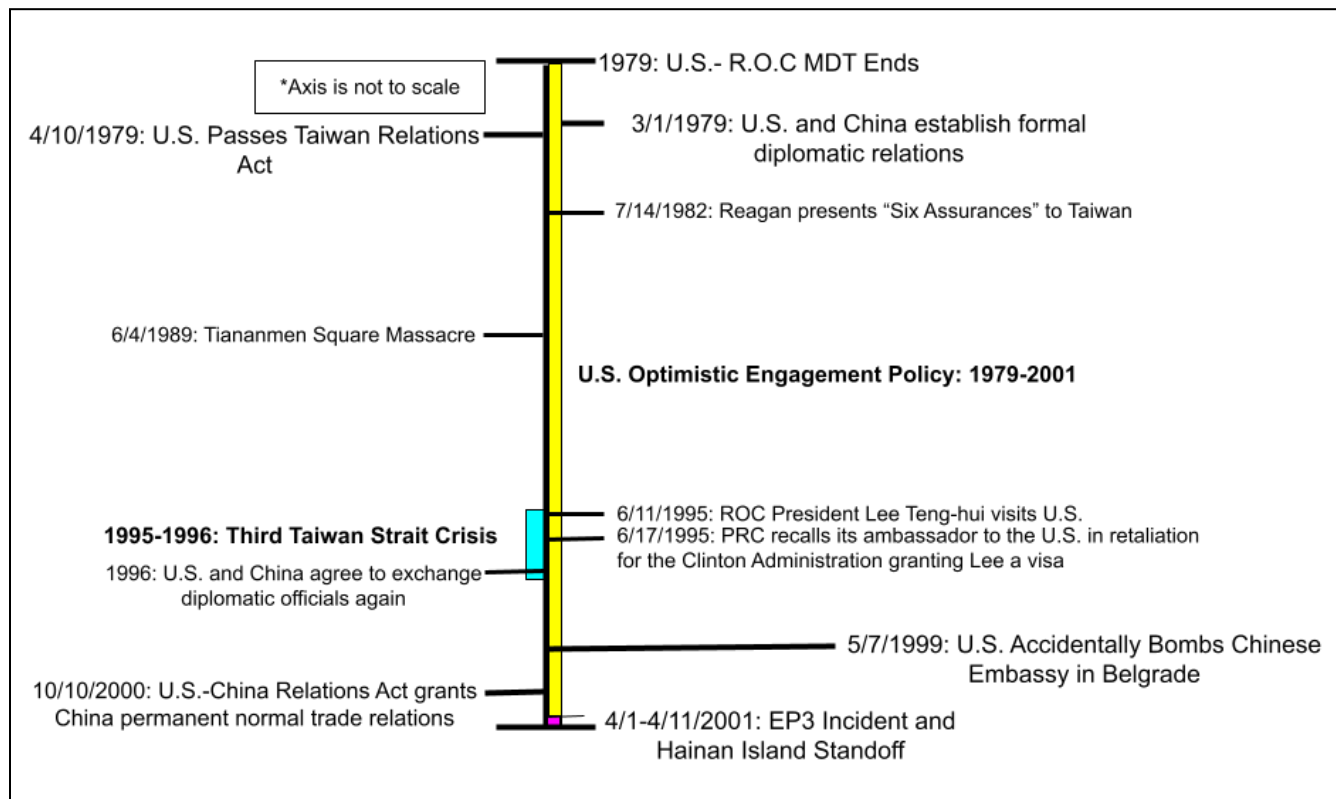
³⁰⁷ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan*, by Susan V. Lawrence, IF11665 (2023): <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11665.pdf>; these six assurances promises, among other things, to continue arms supply to Taiwan and a refusal to take a stance on the sovereignty of the island. Both these stances were irritating to the Chinese and seen as contradictory to agreements between the U.S. and China laid out in the Three Communiqués issued 1972, 1979, and 1982. Texts of all three communiqués are available here: <https://www.ait.org.tw/tag/three-communicues/>.

³⁰⁸ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 151-152.

³⁰⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington D.C. 2001), 29.

document clearly shows how the United States' view of China was still tinged with suspicion, even during this period of optimistic engagement.

Figure 3.3: Timeline of U.S.-China Relations During Optimistic Engagement (1973-2001)



Source: Author³¹⁰

³¹⁰ Timeline made based on information from: Yanzhong Huang, "China: Year in Review 2023," Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-year-review-2023>; <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11665.pdf>; "The United States Security Partnership with Taiwan" (Brookings Institute, July 16, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/fp_20160713_taiwan_alliance.pdf; Daniel Southerland, "FIRST PRIVATE VISIT TO U.S. COMPLETED, TAIWAN PRESIDENT MULLS TRIP TO ALASKA," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/11/first-private-visit-to-us-completed-taiwan-president-mulls-trip-to-alaska/223c4093-18cd-4a34-be95-d5f9ef3ae2b3/>; Steven Mufson, "CHINA RECALLS AMBASSADOR TO U.S. TO PROTEST VISA TO TAIWAN LEADER," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/17/china-recalls-ambassador-to-us-to-protest-visa-to-taiwan-leader/1e6c9822-d820-4590-998f-9744ca94c07e/>.

2002-2012: COOPERATION UNDER GROWING SUSPICION

Ambassador Freeman argues that by 2002 “you see suspicions on both sides taking hold. There's no longer a strategic rationale for the relationship, no more common enemy in the Soviet Union.”³¹¹ China’s increasing wealth and improved military capabilities “clearly designed to counter U.S. and allied interests in the Asia-Pacific” caused the U.S to appraise China with increasing suspicion.³¹² The United States still maintained military ties with China, and encouraged China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system.³¹³ However, concerns about China’s growing power are apparent in the United States’ foreign policy towards China and East Asia. As shown in figure 3.4, the U.S. began to criticize China’s commitment to international norms and shift its foreign policy focus from Europe and the Middle East to Asia.³¹⁴

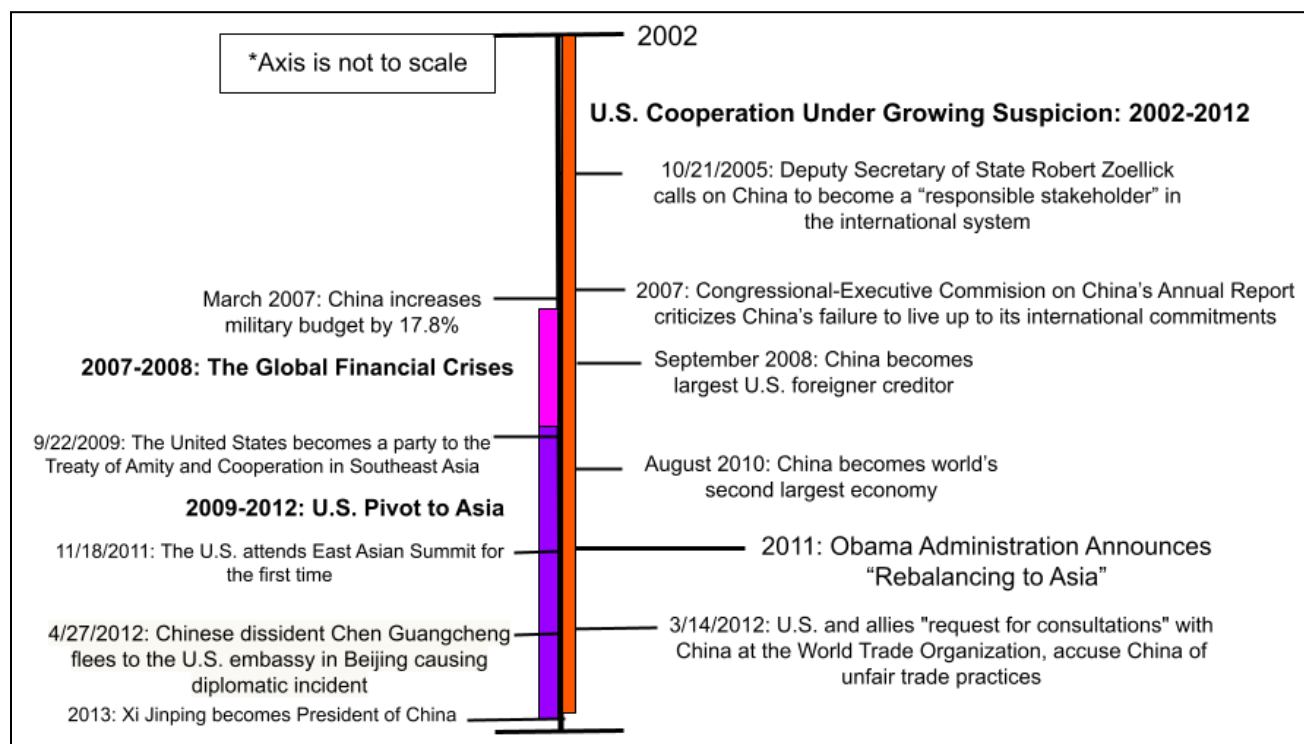
³¹¹ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

³¹² Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 152.

³¹³ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018),

³¹⁴ For specifics and U.S. policy recommendations regarding China’s failure to adhere to its international commitments, see: “Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2007 ANNUAL REPORT,” Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2007, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2007-annual-report>.

Figure 3.4: Timeline of U.S.-China Relations Under Growing Suspicion (2002-2012)



Source: Author³¹⁵

The United States' new focus on Asia was first signaled in February 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her first official overseas visit to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) headquarters, a choice ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan praised as showing "the seriousness of the United States to end its diplomatic

³¹⁵ Information from: "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>; Christopher Alessi and Elizabeth C. Economy, Challenging China's Trade Practices, other, *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/challenging-chinas-trade-practices>; 1. "Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2007 ANNUAL REPORT," Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2007, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2007-annual-report>; 1. "China Rejects U.S. Criticism of Military Build-Up," Reuters, August 9, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSPEK243418/>; Hannah Beech, "Blind Chinese Activist Escapes from House Arrest, Said to Enter U.S. Protection," Time, April 12, 2007, <https://world.time.com/2012/04/27/blind-chinese-activist-missing-after-reportedly-escaping-from-house-arrest/>; "United States Accedes to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," U.S. Department of State, July 22, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/126294.htm>; 1. Matt Compton, "President Obama at the East Asia Summit," National Archives and Records Administration, November 18, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/11/18/president-obama-east-asia-summit>; Robert Zoellick, "NCUSCR Newsletter," November 21, 2005, https://www.ncuscr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/migration_Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf; John Weinberg, "The Great Recession and Its Aftermath," Federal Reserve History, November 22, 2013, <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-recession-and-its-aftermath>.

absenteeism in the region”³¹⁶ This visit was followed by the U.S. signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and cooperation in July 2009.³¹⁷ Although the Obama Administration would only officially announce the “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific” in 2011, these early actions were clear signals of a shift in U.S. priorities.³¹⁸ Through this “Rebalance to Asia,” the U.S. intended to increase its military presence, improve its security relationships, and expand its economic ties in the Indo-Pacific.³¹⁹ Figure 3.4 shows how the U.S.’s practical shift in policy focus to Asia was prompted by the undercurrent of suspicion discussed in the previous section, the Global Financial Crisis, and domestic pressures.³²⁰

The Global Financial Crises influenced U.S-China relations in two key ways. First, as Dr. Heer explains, “There's a prevailing line of analysis that the Chinese interpreted the Global Financial Crisis as an indicator to them that the U.S. was vulnerable, and that the Chinese should take advantage of that, and press their case against us.”³²¹ Second, the Global Financial Crisis increased the importance of economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific, while simultaneously introducing budget constraints that prompted the U.S. to rebalance in order to preserve its

³¹⁶ Tongfi Kim, “U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179.

³¹⁷ Tongfi Kim, “U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179.

³¹⁸ This “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific” is also called “the U.S. Pivot to Asia,” for examples of the use of this term see: Steven Pifer and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “The American Pivot to Asia,” Brookings, December 21, 2011; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>; Robert D. Blackwill, “The U.S. Pivot to Asia and American Grand Strategy,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/project/us-pivot-asia-and-american-grand-strategy>.

³¹⁹ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 155. Economic action included joining the East Asia Summit and facilitating the creation of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership.

³²⁰ John Weinberg, “The Great Recession and Its Aftermath,” Federal Reserve History, November 22, 2013, <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-recession-and-its-aftermath>.

³²¹ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

military capabilities in Asia.³²² Finally, the rebalance was likely prompted by the domestic and international political unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. pivot to Asia allowed the U.S. to distract from these unpopular conflicts and redistribute resources to Asia.³²³

Now, there is a debate on the success of the U.S. rebalance to Asia, with Admiral Jonathan Greenert pointing out that the U.S. appears to have fallen short of the policy's initial goals, even if the the Department of State and Department of Defense did reallocate resources to the Indo-Pacific.³²⁴ Additionally, this period of rebalancing to Asia did not prevent U.S.-China cooperation, even in military exercises.³²⁵ Therefore, the Obama Administration's policy continued to walk the line between cooperation and competition, even as the U.S. began to adopt increasingly competitive policies. For example, the Administration's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review express concern about China's growing military capabilities and long-term intentions, but in the next paragraph states:

China's military has begun to develop new roles, missions, and capabilities in support of its growing regional and global interest, which would enable it to play a more substantial and constructive role in international affairs. The United States welcomes a strong, prosperous, and successful China that plays a greater global role.³²⁶

Finally, it is also important to note that this growing suspicion was not just from the U.S. side. Despite Obama Administration officials emphasizing that the Rebalance to Asia was not an

³²² Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 177.

³²³ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 176.

³²⁴ Jonathan W. Greenert, "Revisiting the Rebalance to the Pacific: Time for a Refresh?" *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/revisiting-the-rebalance-to-the-pacific-time-for-a-refresh/>.

³²⁵ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 155. For example, both countries participated in counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa region during this time period.

³²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington D.C. 2010), 31, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

action aimed at China,³²⁷ China nonetheless interpreted it as a U.S. containment policy.³²⁸ As Dr. Heer, a career CIA Asia specialist and chief NIO for Asia for over a decade, explained in an interview, “the Chinese have every reason to perceive it operationally as having that objective: of minimizing their power and wealth and influence, especially within their own region. And it has kind of a lot of the earmarks of a containment strategy as Kennan laid it out toward the Soviet Union 70 years ago.”³²⁹

2013-SEPTEMBER 2023: INCREASING COMPETITION

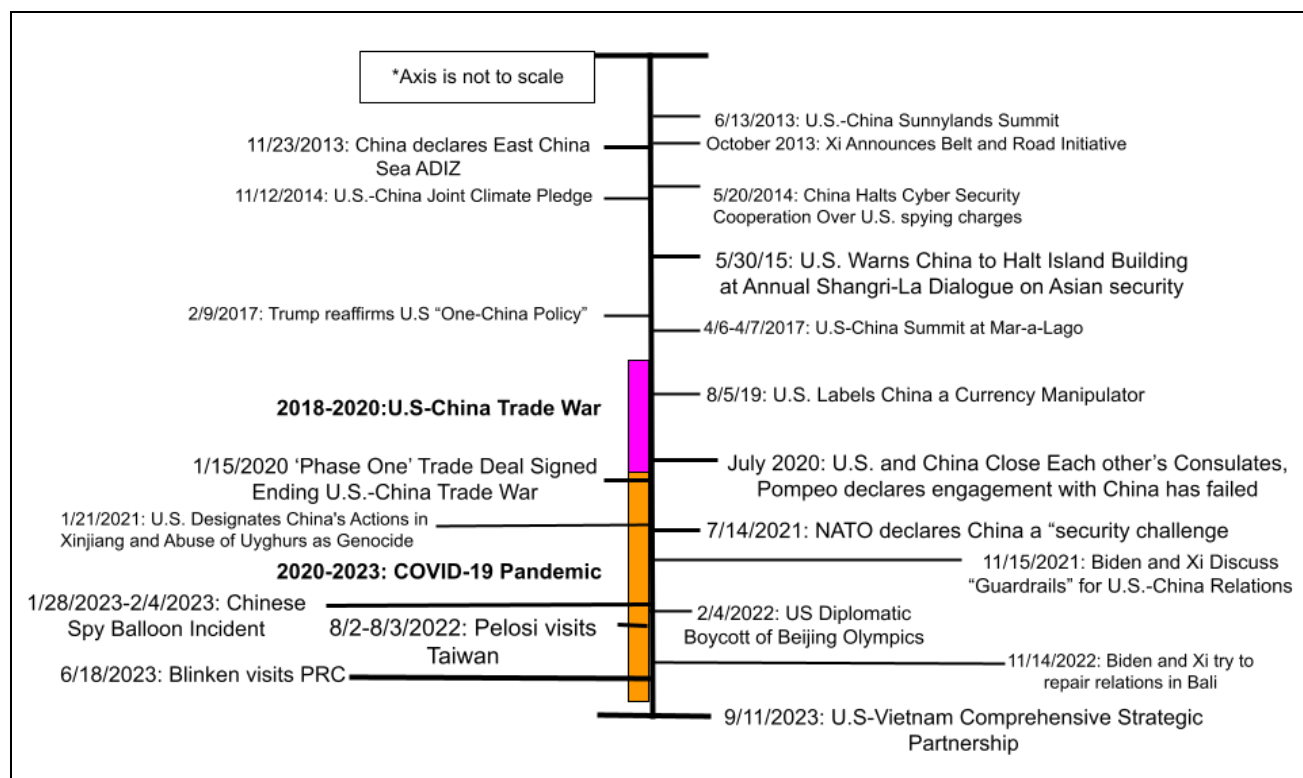
The U.S. rebalance to Asia continued throughout the second-term of the Obama administration, likely because U.S-China relations became increasingly competitive over the next ten years. The timeline in figure 3.5 shows how the pace of competition rapidly increased over this period, but especially grew in intensity in 2018.

³²⁷ Tongfi Kim, “U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 176-177. For an example, see Hillary Clinton’s 2011 Article “America’s Pacific Century” in Foreign Affairs: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

³²⁸ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 155.

³²⁹ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

Figure 3.5: Timeline of U.S.-China Relations Under Increasing Competition (2013-Sept. 2023)



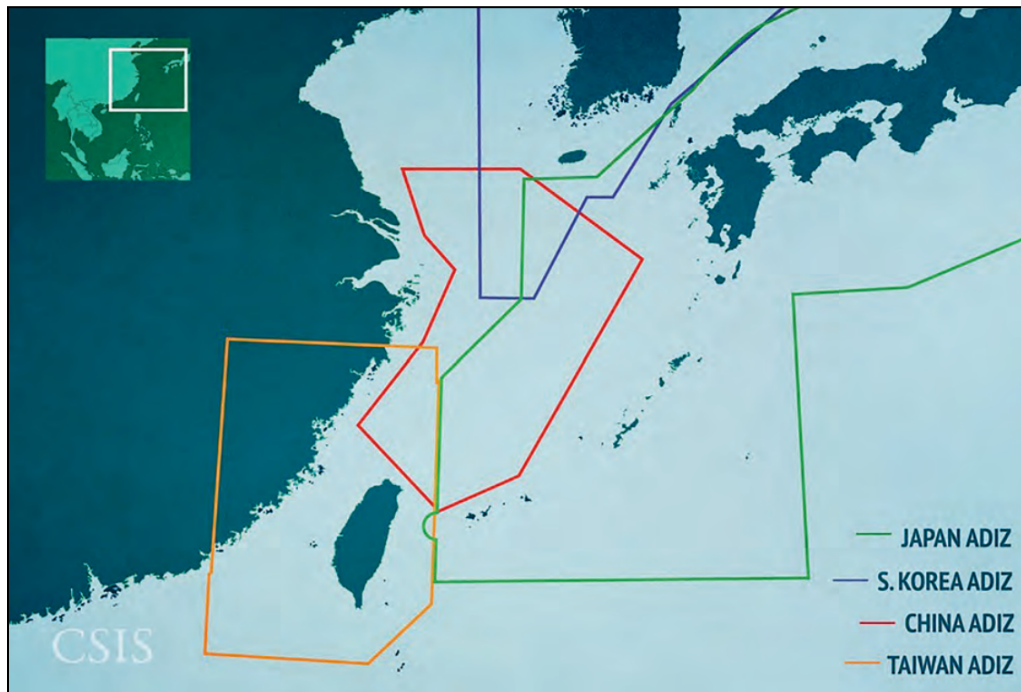
Source: Author³³⁰

One early example of this competition occurred in November of 2013, when the Chinese Ministry of Defense declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. As shown in figure 3.6, this ADIZ overlapped with those of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and was deemed “wildly out of step with international norms regarding such

³³⁰ Timeline constructed based on information from: Ting Shi and Michael Riley, “China Halts Cybersecurity Cooperation After U.S. Spying Charges,” *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2014, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-05-20/china-suspends-cybersecurity-cooperation-with-u-s-after-charges?embedded-checkout=true>; Jaemin Lee, “China’s Declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea: Implications for Public International Law,” *American Society for International Law*, August 19, 2014, <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/18/issue/17/china%E2%80%99s-declaration-air-defense-identification-zone-east-china-sea>; “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>; “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

identification zones” by observers, both because of its size and the Chinese requirement that all aircraft crossing the zone had to report flight plans and follow other strict rules.³³¹

Figure 3.6: Overlapping ADIZs in the East China Sea



Source: CSIS Report: Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia³³²

The United States immediately issued a diplomatic protest, with new Secretary of State John Kerry claiming the zone would “increase tensions in the region and create risks of an incident.”³³³ This diplomatic protest was then quickly followed by a freedom of overflight

³³¹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): America's Century in the South China Sea (New York: Oxford University Press), 2022, 201.

³³² Michael Green et al., rep., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2017), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170505_GreenM_CounteringCoercionAsia_Web.pdf, 148.

³³³ Cited in Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): America's Century in the South China Sea (New York: Oxford University Press), 2022, 201.

operation where two U.S. B-52 bombers flew through the ADIZ without prior notification or adherence to China's new rules.³³⁴

Although both military and diplomatic cooperation between the U.S. and China did not completely cease during this period,³³⁵ the East China Sea ADIZ controversy set the tone for the remainder of the Obama Administration's China policy. These years were marked by multilateral attempts to contain China, such as the United States' Trans-Pacific Partnership, which notably excluded China and allowed the U.S. "to design the rules of the game" for Pacific trade and investment.³³⁶

Then during the Trump Administration, U.S.-China competition continued to grow more intense, although the exact nature of that competition is a topic of scholarly debate. Freeman characterized U.S. policy during the 2010s, and especially under the Trump Administration, as "the actual launching of an economic and technological war on China."³³⁷ Other scholars instead characterize U.S.-China competition as becoming more competitive over time, but not at the level of economic or technological warfare. For example, Heer believes that U.S. policy has "become more competitive, I would say, almost more confrontational, more adversarial, even."³³⁸

³³⁴ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): America's Century in the South China Sea (New York: Oxford University Press), 2022, 201.

³³⁵ For example, the People's Liberation Army Navy participated in the Rim of the Pacific exercise in the waters off Hawaii in 2014. See: Christopher Nelson, "RIMPAC 2014 – THE INS AND OUT," Center for International Maritime Security, June 27, 2014, <https://cimsec.org/rimpac-2014-ins-outs/>; The U.S. and China also cooperated on the Paris Climate Agreement, see: David G. Victor, "Rebuilding US-Chinese Cooperation on Climate Change: The Science and Technology Opportunity," Brookings, October 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rebuilding-us-chinese-cooperation-on-climate-change-the-science-and-technology-opportunity/>.

³³⁶ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 180-183. Another example that Kim discusses is the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, which was meant to help Southeast Asia build the capability to resist China.

³³⁷ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

³³⁸ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

Meanwhile, Dr. Michael Swaine argues that since the beginning of this escalating competition “there's more of a zero sum nature for the relationship than there had been in the past, and more concern about the level of threat that is posed if things go wrong, if things don't work out.”³³⁹ Although these characterizations differ, they do all agree that the United States engaged in more competitive and confrontational economical and political policies during this period.

Economic

The United States has been concerned about the strength of China's economy and wary about China's ability to be a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system since the late 2000s. However, fear about China's increasing economic leverage truly began to appear when China launched its Belt and Road Initiative (*yīdài yīlù*, 一带一路) in 2013.³⁴⁰ The U.S. found itself increasingly competing with China for Asian markets³⁴¹ and soon accused China of using the Belt and Road Initiative and economic statecraft to expand and spread its influence in Asia.³⁴² Although there are several examples of U.S-China economic competition over the last decade,

³³⁹ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024.

³⁴⁰ James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, “China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³⁴¹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 464.

³⁴² James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, “China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

including investment competition prompted by the Belt and Road initiative,³⁴³ the greatest example of this economic competition was the U.S-China Trade War from 2018 to 2020.³⁴⁴

The Trump administration began this trade war in February 2018 by unilaterally enforcing sweeping tariffs on \$50 billion USD worth of Chinese imports, such as steel imports and electronics, in response to charges of Chinese theft of U.S technology and intellectual property.³⁴⁵ The administration also wanted to punish China for years of perceived Chinese abuse of the benefits provided by free trade.³⁴⁶ China imposed retaliatory measures, and the trade war escalated over the next two years, including further tariff increases and bans on Chinese products.³⁴⁷ This escalating series of economic punishments was eventually halted by the “Phase One” Trade Deal signed in January of 2020. The deal relaxed some of the tariffs in return for China committing to buying more American goods and enforcing intellectual property

³⁴³ For example, Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri discuss how the U.S’s 2018 “Better Utilisation of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act” was promoted as a potential tool for countering China’s Belt and Road Initiative. “The Act allowed the government to provide US\$60 billion for the newly-established US International Development Finance Corp (IDFC) to support infrastructure development in Asia and Africa. American leaders and senior officials frequently mention that the new BUILD Act can be a tool to counter China’s BRI in the Indo-Pacific region.” Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 464.

³⁴⁴ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁴⁵ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁴⁶ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁴⁷ Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Statement By U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer on Section 301 Action*, Washington D.C: Office of the United States Trade Representative, May 10, 2019. <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2019/may/statement-us-trade-representative>.

protections,³⁴⁸ but the deal was criticized for failing to remove all U.S. Tariffs, or address the Chinese government's extensive subsidies.³⁴⁹

Political

The U.S. also altered its overall grand strategy towards China during this period. The Pivot to Asia was one of the largest manifestations of this change in foreign policy, and the U.S. became much more concerned about China's growing influence in East Asia and intimidation of its neighbors. One way it sought to counter this influence was by beginning to directly punish China for its behavior in the South China Sea. For example, it issued the strongest official condemnation of China's SCS claims and coercive behavior yet in the 2019 State Department vision document on the Free and Open Indo Pacific.³⁵⁰

Additionally, the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 caused further breakdowns in the U.S.-China dialogue and cooperation, with both sides lodging unfounded claims that the other was to blame for the pandemic.³⁵¹ The tit-for-tat actions that followed, such as the United States and China closing each other's consulates in July of 2020 after the U.S. accused the

³⁴⁸ "ECONOMIC AND TRADE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA" conclusion date: January 20, 2020, https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf.

³⁴⁹ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁵⁰ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 238-239.

³⁵¹ For example, in 2020 a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed, without evidence, that the U.S. military brought the virus to China, while President Trump claimed COVID-19 spread because of failures by the Chinese government. Zachary Cohen, Alex Maquardt, and Kylie Atwood, "Blame Game Escalates between US and China over Coronavirus Disinformation," CNN, March 25, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/politics/us-china-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign/index.html>.

Chinese of using their Houston Consulate to engage in espionage and I.P. theft,³⁵² culminated in a now infamous speech “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In this speech, he declared:

We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it.³⁵³

Essentially, Pompeo declared that U.S. engagement with China had failed, which the Council on Foreign Relations marks as a signal of profound shifts in U.S. policy.³⁵⁴

Despite Chinese hopes to the contrary,³⁵⁵ figure 3.6 shows that the Biden administration continued the previous administration’s approach to China, including maintaining U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports and sanctions on Chinese officials.³⁵⁶ Although 2021 saw both sides try to cooperate over issues like climate change, and work together to establish “Guardrails” to avoid conflict,³⁵⁷ competition continued to dominate U.S-China policy. This is clear in Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s 2022 speech “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” which explicitly stated that maintaining and improving the U.S.’s competitiveness vis-a-vis China was a top priority for the administration.³⁵⁸ The speech clearly positions China as

³⁵²“Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁵³ Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” Yorba Linda, California, July 23, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>

³⁵⁴ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁵⁵ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

³⁵⁶ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁵⁷ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁵⁸ Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” Speech at George Washington University, Washington D.C. May 26, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

the “most serious long-term challenge to the international order” and announces that the U.S. will invest in domestic infrastructure, work with its allies and partners to oppose China’s increasing aggression, and compete with China globally.³⁵⁹ This speech leaves little room for productive engagement with China, although neither side truly seems interested in cooperation.

Behavior from U.S. policy makers has been brazenly confrontational, such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visiting Taiwan in August 2022³⁶⁰ in spite of Chinese objections, leading China to break off climate talks and military communications and conduct “destabilizing” live-fire drills and ballistic missile launches in the Taiwan Strait.³⁶¹ Similarly, China sent spy balloons into U.S. airspace in February 2023, leading Secretary of State Blinken to cancel a confidence building trip to Beijing.³⁶² As Ambassador Freeman points out:

If you look at the past year, the meetings in Bali, and then again in San Francisco, between Xi Jinping and President Biden, the only thing they did: let's try to adjust the tone and the atmosphere of the relationship. Not a single substantive issue was addressed, and, in fact, the United States continued to impose unilateral sanctions, export controls, and so forth against China, premised on China's status as an enemy.³⁶³

There are several theories about why U.S-China cooperation faltered so quickly during this period. One line of reasoning is that the U.S and China no longer have a common enemy to unite them. As Freeman argues, China and the U.S. lost their common enemy in the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and “the substitution for that, which is global issues, climate change,

³⁵⁹ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁶⁰ “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Preserving Peace and Stability Across the Taiwan Strait* (Washington D.C. 2022). <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-preserving-peace-and-stability-across-the-taiwan-strait/>

³⁶² “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁶³ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

nonproliferation and so forth, is simply not sufficiently compelling politically to sustain a strong US-China relationship.”³⁶⁴ Another explanation that Heer argues is the changing material balance of power in the world. In this line of reasoning, the United States has become “more confrontational dealing with China because of a sense of vulnerability to China's ambitions...it's a combination of our perception and the reality of the balance of power.”³⁶⁵ Finally, increasing U.S-China competition could be a result of domestic issues within the United States itself, and a displacement of frustration over issues like unemployment and political gridlock onto China. As Dr. Douglas Paal explained in an interview,

Now the US, after 20 years of seeking profits at somebody else's labor and to our benefit, doesn't like the balance, hasn't figured out a way to rebalance its energies. The biggest struggle is with ourselves. We don't know where we want to go to support our labor force, what we want to do, and China is the substitute target for dealing with our own internal problems, we tend to displace them on to China.³⁶⁶

Increasing competition could also be caused by a combination of these factors, but no matter the cause, the competition between the world's two largest economies is a considerable factor in world politics. This competition will likely continue to dominate U.S.-China relations for the foreseeable future, including in areas that were previously seen as peripheral to U.S. interests, like South China Sea.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

³⁶⁵ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

³⁶⁶ Douglas Paal, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), January 26, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BHc-UslULP3cjjIHIW7cEJXcv7uhiGHSGmXqZ18tiaw/edit?usp=sharing>.

³⁶⁷ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024. Dr. Swaine argues that “the problem is that in the worsening competition between the United States and China you have a tendency to interpret more and more issues in terms of that competition. So, you end up making more and more issues questions of strategic leverage, and questions of dominance or subordination. And so many issues become litmus tests for whether or not the United States or China have strategic leverage, or whether or not they're maintaining their freedom of action, and so, you know, you've seen this happen in the South China Sea, this has happened in Taiwan.”

SUMMARY

Over the last twenty years, U.S.-China relations have undergone several transitions. The U.S. and China changed from Cold War adversaries, to aligned powers, than to competitors. The first important takeaway from this brief overview of U.S-China relations is that the U.S. and China were not doomed to be competitors. Instead, decisions made early on by both sides, as well as different ideological approaches to international issues, led them to suspicion, distrust, and then competition. The second major takeaway is that the breakdown of U.S.-China relations is closely tied to balance of power politics. Although domestic factors and larger geopolitical changes also played a role, the U.S. since 2000 has been increasingly worried about China's growing power and influence, and the threat it poses to the U.S.-led LWO. Meanwhile, China's growing power has made it less tolerant of the United States' presence in East Asia and less willing to adhere to parts of the Liberal World Order that oppose its interests. This situation sets both sides up for competition, and as broader U.S-China competition has grown more intense, more and more issues become framed in that competition. Some examples discussed in this chapter's overview are conceptions of intellectual property and respect for human rights. Another area is the rules-based maritime order, which is one of the main points of contention between the United States and China in the South China Sea.

A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES

In order to understand the history of U.S. behavior and policy in the South China Sea, it is important to provide background information on the South China Sea itself. As shown in the

map displayed in figure 3.7, the South China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea³⁶⁸ in Southeast Asia, bordered by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.³⁶⁹

Figure 3.7: Political Map of the South China Sea



Source: Nations Online Project³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ A semi-enclosed sea is defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as “a gulf, basin or sea surrounded by two or more States and connected to another sea or the ocean by a narrow outlet or consisting entirely or primarily of the territorial seas and exclusive economic zones of two or more coastal States.” Keyuan Zou, “Introduction” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1.

³⁶⁹ Dustin Kuan-Hsiung Wang, “FISHERIES MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA” in an *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 243.

³⁷⁰ Klaus Kästle, “Map of the South China Sea,” Nations Online Project, 2024, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/South-China-Sea-political-map.htm>.

The South China Sea is an important waterway for many of these coastal states as a means of transportation³⁷¹ and source economic livelihood due to its rich fisheries.³⁷² However, it is mainly discussed in the United States as the site of intense sovereignty and maritime disputes,³⁷³ and an area where China is increasingly seeking to exert its influence.³⁷⁴

As Admiral Michael McDevitt explained in an interview, the South China Sea is home to two different types of sovereignty disputes: territorial sovereignty disputes and maritime sovereignty disputes (hereafter maritime disputes).³⁷⁵ The former are sovereignty disputes over territory, which involve two or more states claiming ownership of land.³⁷⁶ Meanwhile, maritime disputes are when two states have overlapping jurisdictional claims over maritime areas where they claim sovereign rights, rights to resources, or right to regulate other states' behavior.³⁷⁷ In

³⁷¹ Stein Tønnesson, "The South China Sea: Historical Developments" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 31.

³⁷² Dustin Kuan-Hsiung Wang, "FISHERIES MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 245.

³⁷³ For example, see congressional sanctions on China as a result of its behavior in territorial disputes in the South China Sea: U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *South China Sea and East China Sea Sanctions Act of 2021 (S.1657)*, 117th Cong., 2021. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1657>; or news media reporting on the disputes like: Kathleen Magramo, "Tensions Are Flaring Once More in the South China Sea. Here's Why It Matters for the World," CNN, September 29, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/29/asia/south-china-sea-tensions-philippines-china-us-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³⁷⁴ For example, news media coverage like: Agnes Chang and Hannah Beech, "Fleets of Force," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/16/world/asia/south-china-sea-ships.html>; 1. Lawrence Richard, "US Navy Responds after China Claims American Warship 'illegally Intruded' into the South China Sea," *Fox News*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/us-navy-responds-china-claims-american-warship-illegally-intruded-south-china-sea>.

³⁷⁵ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024. Transcript available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14W07IcJDAR0YFigaGX-itExfzHFB4Uen/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100499727363606636194&rtopof=true&sd=true>.

³⁷⁶ Rebecca Strating, "Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in the East China Sea," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/maritime-and-sovereignty-disputes-in-the-east-china-sea/>.

³⁷⁷ Rebecca Strating, "Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in the East China Sea," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/maritime-and-sovereignty-disputes-in-the-east-china-sea/>.

the case of the South China Sea, territorial sovereignty disputes are about land features within the SCS, such as reefs, islets, or cays, whereas maritime disputes are about which areas of the South China Sea littoral states have jurisdiction over. Although these disputes are intertwined,³⁷⁸ explaining both types of sovereignty disputes is important because the United States treats the South China Sea maritime disputes differently than the SCS sovereignty disputes.

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY DISPUTES

The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea are complex, not the least because “territorial sovereignty” itself is an international law construct with several different definitions. However, for the sake of this thesis “territorial sovereignty” is the idea that a state has control of territory and control over the activities in that territory.³⁷⁹ Therefore, disputes about territorial sovereignty arise when challenges or incursions occur between two states over territory, and both states claim to own or exercise sovereignty over that territory.³⁸⁰

As Ted McDorman explains, there are several different ways states can claim sovereignty in the South China Sea. Most claimants base their territorial sovereignty claims on a mix of historic rights, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)³⁸¹ defined under the United Nations

³⁷⁸ Michael McDevitt, “Washington Takes a Stand in the South China Sea,” CNA, September 8, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2020/09/washington-takes-a-stand-in-the-south-china-sea>.

³⁷⁹ Ted L. McDorman, “The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 92-93.

³⁸⁰ Ted L. McDorman, “The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 93.

³⁸¹ Exclusive economic zones are defined by UNCLOS as an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in Part V of UNCLOS. UNCLOS defines a state’s EEZ as extending 200 nautical miles from the country’s baseline (normally drawn along the low-waterline of its coast). A state has an exclusive right to living and non-living resources in its EEZ, such as fisheries and seabed natural gas deposits, but other states have a free right to passage and overflight. For more information on EEZs, see: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm#:~:text=The%20exclusive%20economic%20zone%20is,relevant%20provisions%20of%20this%20Convention.

Convention on the Law of the Sea, and occupation/discovery rights.³⁸² Through these types of claims, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia and the Philippines all claim sovereignty over parts of, or sometimes the entirety of, two bodies of features in the SCS: the Spratly Islands³⁸³ and the Paracel Islands.³⁸⁴ However, since China seized the Paracels from Vietnam in 1974, most of the sovereignty disputes are over features in the Spratly Islands.³⁸⁵

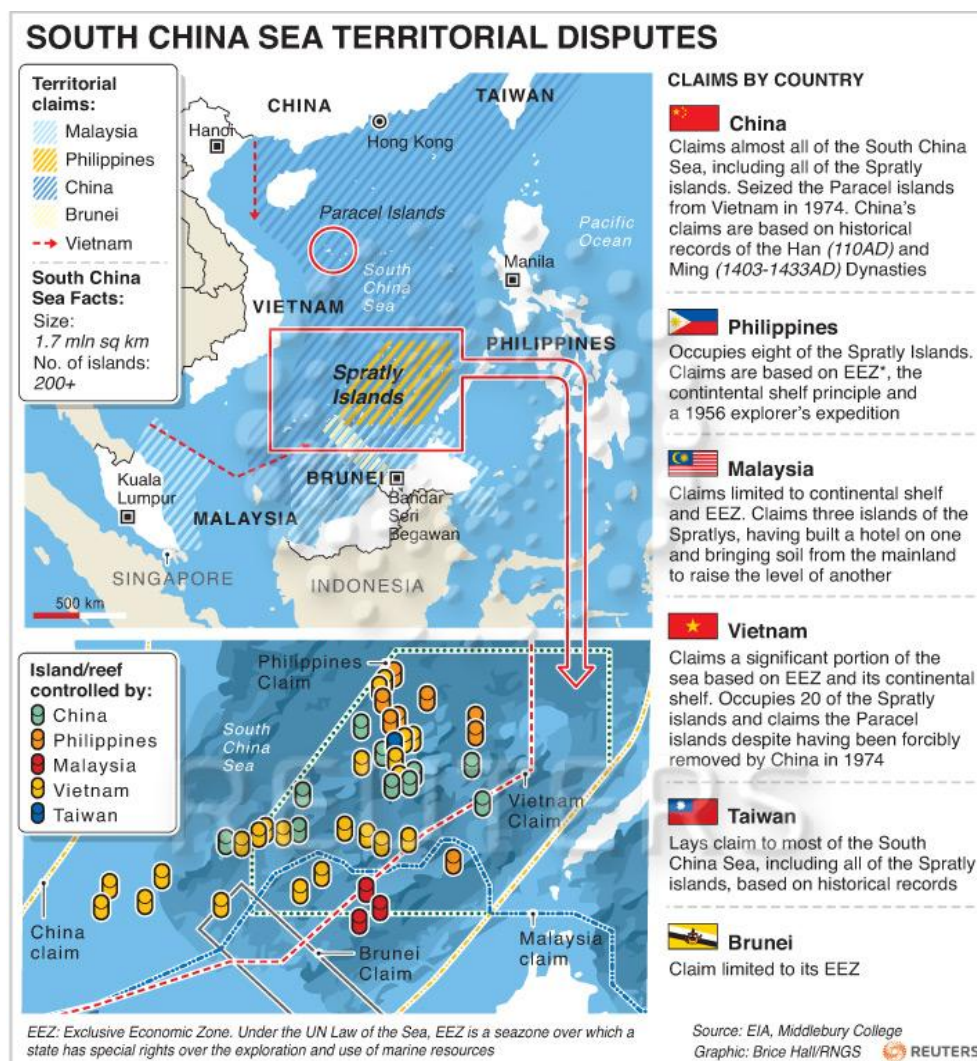
³⁸² Ted L. McDorman, “The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 95-98.

³⁸³ The Spratlys Islands are a group of geographic features including reefs, shoals and rocks in the Southeastern portion of the South China Sea. According to the 2016 Law of the Sea Arbitration case brought by the Philippines, none of these features are legally considered an island.

³⁸⁴ Ted L. McDorman, “The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 98.

³⁸⁵ “Paracel Islands,” Central Intelligence Agency, February 13, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/paracel-islands/#:~:text=China%20has%20occupied%20all%20the,garrison%20occupying%20the%20western%20islands>.

Figure 3.8: Map of the South China Sea Sovereignty Disputes



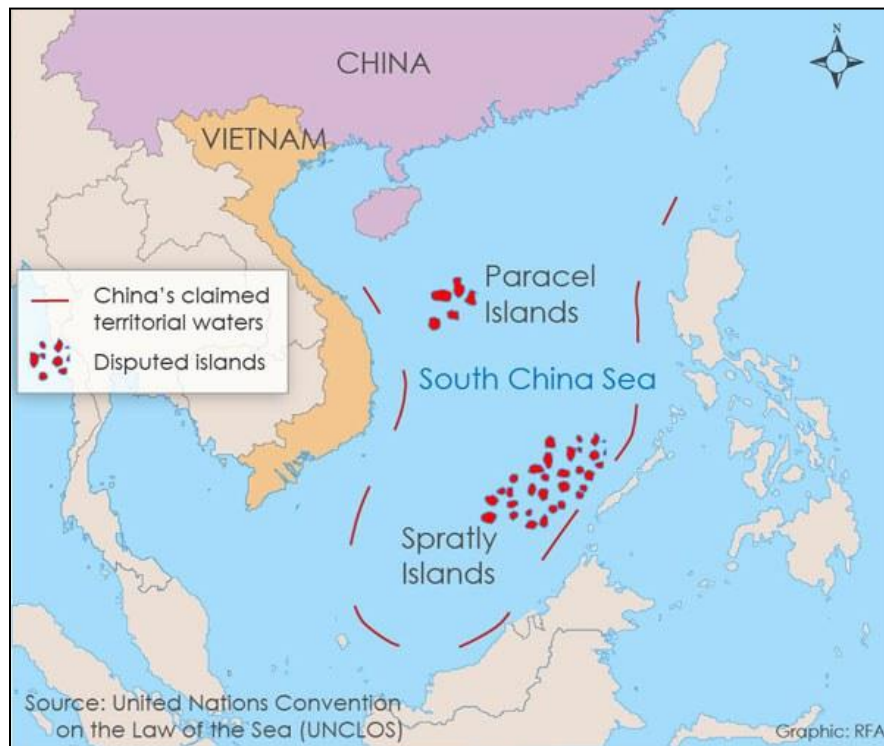
Source: https://blogs.thomsonreuters.com/answerson/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/06/SPRAT_JP.jpg

In terms of U.S. interest in the South China Sea, the most important claimants in these sovereignty disputes are China and the Philippines. In 2009, China issued a note verbale to the Secretary General of the United Nations, asserting “indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters,” and “sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map).”³⁸⁶ The attached

³⁸⁶ People’s Republic of China, notes verbale, CML/17/2009 and CML/18/2009, supra note 23, paragraph 2. https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf.

map referenced in the note displays the nine-dash line,³⁸⁷ which is shown in figure 3.9. The nine-dash line is a line made up of nine segments off the Chinese coast in the South China Sea. The Chinese government calls it a “traditional maritime boundary line” and it appears mainly on Chinese and Taiwanese maps. This boundary first appeared on Chinese maps in 1914, and was officially confirmed in 1947 by the Republic of China and upheld by the People’s Republic of China after the Second World War.³⁸⁸

Figure 3.9: The Nine-dash line



Source: Radio Free Asia³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ Also called the “U-Shaped line” or “dotted line”. For more information on the legal implications of the nine-dash line, Keyuan Zou and Qiang Ye, “The U-shaped line and its legal implications” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021).

³⁸⁸ Keyuan Zou and Qiang Ye, “The U-shaped line and its legal implications” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 123.

³⁸⁹ Wei Pu, “How the Eleven-Dash Line Became a Nine-Dash Line, and Other Stories,” Radio Free Asia, October 11, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/line-07162015121333.html>.

Now, sovereignty over the features in the South China Sea is somewhat ambiguous, as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea does define what it requires for a state to have sovereignty over an island or rock. It does differentiate between features that are rocks, shoals, and islands, as these features are entitled to different maritime zones. However, it does not dictate how states can claim ownership over those features.³⁹⁰ Even the United States has an official policy of neutrality regarding these territorial disputes.³⁹¹ However, China's extensive territorial claims through the nine-dash line are one of the major issues fueling the South China Sea disputes.

The second major claimant relevant to U.S. policy in the South China Sea is the Philippines. The Philippines is the oldest U.S ally in the Indo-Pacific³⁹² and as Dr. Heer points out, is an important connection to the SCS because the U.S. has “a mutual defense pact with them,” making them “the primary vehicle... right now for our strategy for countering China in the South China Sea.”³⁹³ The Philippine territorial claim is represented in figure 3.10 by the orange polygon, which overlaps with China's nine-dash line. The Philippines officially calls this claim the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG), an area that includes most of the features in the Spratly Islands.³⁹⁴ Although the U.S. has sought to help the Philippines build the capacity to defend its

³⁹⁰ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

³⁹¹ Raul Pedrozo, “U.S. Policy on the South China Sea,” *International Law Studies* 97, no. 201 (2021): 75–80, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2948&context=ils>.

³⁹² “Fact Sheet: Investing in The Special Friendship and Alliance between the United States and the Philippines,” The White House, May 1, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/fact-sheet-investing-in-the-special-friendship-and-alliance-between-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/#:~:text=Labor%20Working%20Group,THE%20U.S.%2DPHILIPPINES%20ALLIANCE,the%20broader%20Indo%2DPacific%20region>.

³⁹³ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

³⁹⁴ Ted L. McDorman, “The territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 97.

maritime claims in the South China Sea,³⁹⁵ the U.S.-Philippine alliance has not changed the United States stance on territorial sovereignty.³⁹⁶

Figure 3.10: The Kalayaan Island Group



Source: Author³⁹⁷

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA MARITIME DISPUTES

Maritime disputes are fundamentally about water and the resources therein. Maritime disputes have been officially governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

³⁹⁵ “Fact Sheet: U.S. Building Maritime Capacity in Southeast Asia,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia, March 25, 2016, <https://id.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/embassy-fact-sheets/fact-sheet-u-s-building-maritime-capacity-in-southeast-asia/>; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 190-191.

³⁹⁶ Michael McDevitt, “Washington Takes a Stand in the South China Sea,” CNA, September 8, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2020/09/washington-takes-a-stand-in-the-south-china-sea>.

³⁹⁷ Made by combining a map from <https://www.kalayaanpalawan.gov.ph/geo.html>, with map from <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/line-07162015121333.html>.

since 1982.³⁹⁸ This treaty aimed to create a “comprehensive regime of law and order in the world's oceans and seas, establishing rules governing all uses of the oceans and their resources,” and to provide processes for arbitration and further developing areas of the law of the sea.³⁹⁹

UNCLOS is important in the South China Sea for three main reasons. First, all of the South China Sea claimants are party to the convention as of February 2024, meaning that they all are guaranteed rights by the convention and bound by its rules.⁴⁰⁰ The U.S., on the other hand, has not ratified UNCLOS,⁴⁰¹ although it does claim to align its policy with the rules and expectations of the convention.⁴⁰² Second, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is important because it defines the baselines from which states can legally stake a maritime claim in the South China Sea, including claiming a twelve nautical mile territorial sea and a two hundred nautical mile EEZ.⁴⁰³ Baselines under UNCLOS “represent the “boundary” between land and sea and therefore provide the “starting line” for the measurement of the limits of

³⁹⁸ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, December 10, 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf, 25. UNCLOS is also referred to as the Law of the Sea (LOS) by some scholars.

³⁹⁹ “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” International Maritime Organization, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/legal/pages/unitednationsconventiononthelawofthesea.aspx#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Convention%20on,the%20oceans%20and%20their%20resources>.

⁴⁰⁰ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106.

⁴⁰¹ For an examination of the debate over ratifying UNCLOS see: 1. Lara Malavar, “It Is Time for the United States to Ratify UNCLOS,” U.S. Naval Institute, October 15, 2021, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/june/it-time-united-states-ratify-unclos>.

⁴⁰² Pompeo, Michael. “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea.” Press Statement, July 13, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁴⁰³ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106; Rebecca Strating, “Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in the East China Sea,” The National Bureau of Asian Research, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/maritime-and-sovereignty-disputes-in-the-east-china-sea/>.

maritime claims.”⁴⁰⁴ However, in the SCS, several claimants have created baselines that are questionably compliant with UNCLOS,⁴⁰⁵ and in some cases clearly excessive.⁴⁰⁶ Essentially, China, Vietnam, and Taiwan all use the wrong type of baseline for their EEZs,⁴⁰⁷ and the resulting complex map of exclusive economic zones and other claimed maritime boundaries in the South China Sea are outlined in figure 3.11.

Under UNCLOS, these three states should all employ normal baselines drawn along “the low-water line along the coast as marked on large-scale charts officially recognized by the coastal State.”⁴⁰⁸ However, they all use straight baselines, which are only supposed to be drawn where “the coastline is particularly complex, giving rise to ‘highly irregular’ normal baselines,” and should only be applied in localities “where the coastline is deeply indented and cut into, or if there is a fringe of islands along the coast in its immediate vicinity.”⁴⁰⁹ Clive Schofield posits that Taiwan, China, and Vietnam’s excessive use of straight baselines could be the result of a domino effect, where a case of using straight baselines led neighboring states to do the same in order to

⁴⁰⁴ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106.

⁴⁰⁵ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 107-108.

⁴⁰⁶ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 111.

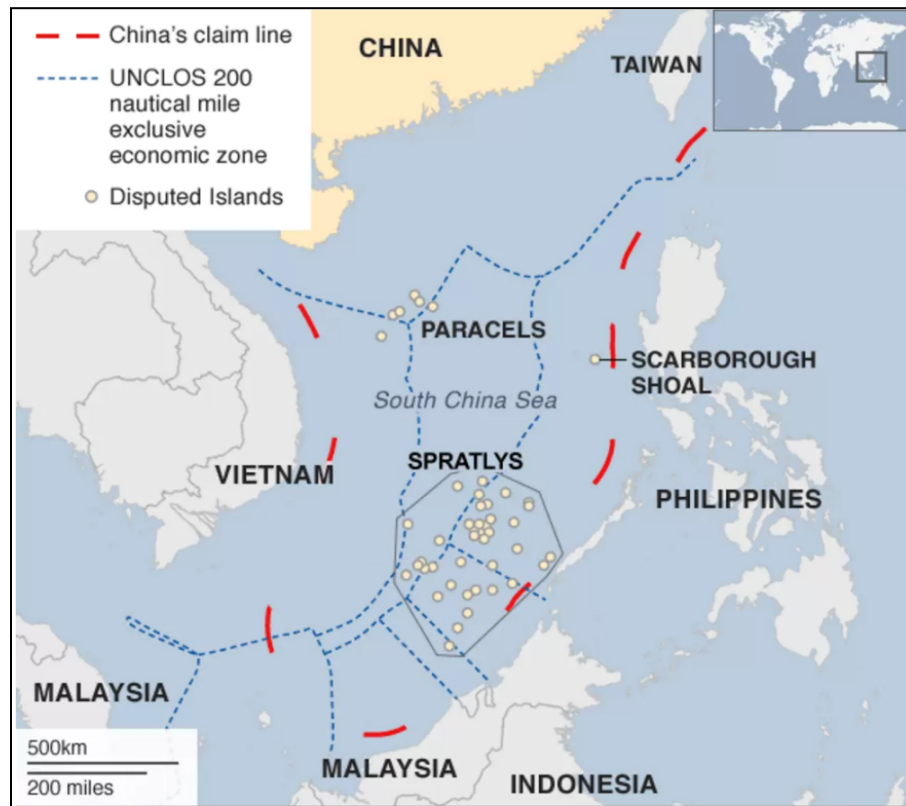
⁴⁰⁷ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 107-108.

⁴⁰⁸ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 107.

⁴⁰⁹ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 107.

shore up their own claims in the SCS.⁴¹⁰ However, the reasoning behind these straight baselines does not change that they are largely non-compliant with UNCLOS.

Figure 3.11: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea



Source: BBC⁴¹¹

Finally, the third major maritime dispute in the South China Sea revolves around the nine-dash line. As previously discussed, China uses the nine-dashed line to claim sovereignty over features, water, living resources, non-living resources, and the seabed in the SCS.⁴¹² Figure 3.11 highlights how the nine-dash line cuts across the EEZs of Philippines, Vietnam, and

⁴¹⁰ Clive Schofield, “Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 111.

⁴¹¹ “What Is the South China Sea Dispute?,” BBC News, July 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>.

⁴¹² People’s Republic of China, notes verbale, CML/17/2009 and CML/18/2009, *supra* note 23, paragraph 2. https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf.

Malaysia, and includes areas outside China's EEZ. China bases its arguments for maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea on "historic rights" and "discovery rights." That is, because Chinese "activities in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago"⁴¹³ it has the right to exercise sovereignty over the South China Sea in modern times. Now, what China specifically claims through "historic rights" and the nine-dash line is ambiguous,⁴¹⁴ but many international law experts claim that China's SCS claims are non-compliant with UNCLOS.⁴¹⁵

Why These Disputes Matter

These territorial and maritime sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea are important for a number of reasons, but especially because it is a vital artery for global maritime trade.⁴¹⁶ According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, \$3.37 trillion worth of goods traveled through the SCS in 2016. The majority of this trade involved imports and exports to East and Southeast Asian countries, but also involved countries outside the region like the U.S. and Germany.⁴¹⁷ However, for this thesis, explaining the South China Sea disputes is important

⁴¹³ People's Republic of China, Foreign Ministry, "Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of the Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines," 7 December 2014, para. 4.

⁴¹⁴ Sophia Kopela, "Historic rights and the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 148-149.

⁴¹⁵ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 162; Robert Beckman, "The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea," *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 142-63, 162.

⁴¹⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke, and Max Molot, "The Critical Role of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea," *China and the U.S.: Cooperation, Competition and/or Conflict An Experimental Assessment*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22586.30>; Clive Schofield, "Competing maritime claims and enduring disputes in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 104.

⁴¹⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke, and Max Molot, "The Critical Role of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea," *China and the U.S.: Cooperation, Competition and/or Conflict An Experimental Assessment*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22586.30>, 339-340.

because they provide necessary context for the United States' long history in the South China Sea and evolving interest in the nature and outcomes of these disputes.

THE UNITED STATES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: PROBLEMS IN THE PERIPHERY

It is important to review the history of U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea to explain why the SCS has become an arena for U.S-China competition over the last twenty years. Although the United States has been involved in the South China Sea since the 1800s and its colonial presence in the Philippines,⁴¹⁸ it had very little interest in the SCS during the 19th and 20th centuries.⁴¹⁹ It was only during the Cold War that the U.S. began to notice the SCS disputes, and even then it did not begin to intervene in them until the 2010s.⁴²⁰ Therefore, U.S. policy towards the South China Sea can be broken into three distinct periods.

The first and longest period of U.S. policy towards the South China Sea lasted from 1800-2008. This period established the foundation for U.S. policy regarding the SCS, and important U.S. interests in the region that continue to influence U.S. policy in 2023. The second period is from 2009-2012 and saw the U.S. express increasing interest in the South China Sea and the various disputes therein due to combination of geopolitical events and the United States' changing relationship with China. U.S. policy towards the SCS changed during this period as a result of escalations in the South China Sea disputes and the Obama Administration's larger

⁴¹⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 8.

⁴¹⁹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 454.

⁴²⁰ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 454.

Pivot to Asia. Finally, the third period of U.S. involvement in the South China Sea spans from 2013 to September 2023. This period witnessed an increase in U.S. policy, attention, and presence in the SCS as a result of increased global competition with China and further escalations in the South China Sea disputes. It is important to note that this periodization is not based on landmark events, but was chosen based on overarching trends in U.S. policy and behavior during each period.

1800-2000: THE NASCENT PERIOD

The United States' earliest connection with the South China Sea was its colonization of the Philippines after the Spanish American War, and the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) it signed with the Philippines in 1951 after Philippine independence. However, even when the Philippines was under U.S. colonial rule, the U.S. did not prioritize the South China Sea in its foreign policy, even when Japan began occupying Philippine-claimed islands in the Spratlys prior to WWII.⁴²¹

After the Second World War, the United States remained largely neutral on the issue of the South China Sea. Its limited activity in the SCS during the Cold War involved preventing the newly founded People's Republic of China from gaining more territory in the region during the 1950s, and helping its ally South Vietnam defend its SCS claims in the 1960s.⁴²² However, that interest in the South China Sea dissipated once the Nixon Administration initiated rapprochement with China in 1973.⁴²³ The U.S. adopted "strict neutrality" regarding the South China Sea to improve relations with China. This neutrality is apparent in the U.S. refusal to

⁴²¹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 455.

⁴²² Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 456-457.

⁴²³ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 457.

intervene in the South Johnson Reef Skirmish between China and Vietnam in 1988, even when China used deadly force to take control of the reef.⁴²⁴

This policy of neutrality continued into the 1990s, but the U.S. began to become concerned about potential conflict over disputed territory and waters in the South China Sea. Therefore, in 1995 the United States declared its official position on the South China Sea, largely in response to China's seizure of Mischief Reef earlier that year.⁴²⁵ In a Daily Press Briefing, the State Department announced that the United States: (1) "strongly opposes the use or threat of force to resolve competing claims"; (2) "has an abiding interest in the maintenance of peace and stability in the South China Sea"; (3) "has a fundamental interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea"; and (4) "takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the various islands, reefs, atolls, and cays in the South China Sea."⁴²⁶ The State Department also made clear that the U.S. "would view with serious concern any maritime claim or restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that was not consistent with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law

⁴²⁴ Johnson South Reef is a submerged reef in the Southwestern Spratly Islands that has a few stretches that are naturally above water for a few hours during low tide. In 1988, the Vietnamese had sent landing parties to defend their claim on South Johnson Reef, but on March 14 the Vietnamese landing parties were confronted by PLAN frigates. Both sides dispute who fired first, but ultimately 64 Vietnamese service members were killed, nine were captured, three Vietnamese ships were sunk or destroyed, and the Chinese seized Johnson South Reef. The Chinese built a 27-acre artificial island on the reef from 2013-2015. (For an apt summary of these events and analysis of its repercussions for Sino-Vietnamese relations, see <https://www.businessinsider.com/vietnam-marks-johnson-south-reef-battle-amid-tensions-with-china-2022-5>).

⁴²⁵ Mischief Reef is a low-tide elevation in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. China occupied the Island in a fait-accompli in 1994, raising tensions with the Philippines and prompting greater interest in China's behavior in the South China Sea from the United States (for a contemporary analysis of this event, see <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA309432>). In 2016, China turned Mischief Reef into one of its largest artificial island bases in the Spratlys, see: (<https://amti.csis.org/mischief-reef/>).

⁴²⁶ Raul Pedrozo , "U.S. Policy on the South China Sea ," *International Law Studies* 97, no. 2021 (2021): 75–80, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2948&context=ils>.

of the Sea.”⁴²⁷ Several scholars⁴²⁸ argue that the United States has maintained these primary interests since 1995, even as it has taken a more interventionist approach to the SCS over time.

The Contemporary Importance of the U.S. Policy in the South China Sea 1800-2008

The period of U.S. policy in the South China Sea from 1800-2008 is important to contemporary U.S. policy regarding the SCS for two significant reasons. The first is that it established the foundation of U.S. neutrality regarding the South China Sea. As Ambassador Freeman argues, “Neither the Paracels nor the Spratlys ever mattered to the United States at all (except as hazards to navigation) until they became symbols of Washington’s determination to curtail the rise of China’s power along its periphery.”⁴²⁹

The second reason is that this period established four mainstays of U.S. policy in the SCS, which were announced by the State Department Statement in 1995. Admiral Michael McDevitt argues that two of those interests, “no use of force” and “maintaining peace and stability in the region,” are both connected to broader U.S. policy where “whatever disputes exist there they should be peacefully resolved through dialogue among the parties or through outside arbitration. The U.S. rejects the use of force.”⁴³⁰ Meanwhile, the third U.S. interest of maintaining freedom of navigation has always been a fundamental interest of the United States,⁴³¹ and “Washington appointed itself to the role of challenging what its maritime lawyers

⁴²⁷ Raul Pedrozo, “U.S. Policy on the South China Sea,” *International Law Studies* 97, no. 2021 (2021): 75–80, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2948&context=ils>.

⁴²⁸ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 156; Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴²⁹ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

⁴³⁰ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴³¹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 2; Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

in the State Department considered ‘excessive maritime claims’ made by other countries around the world.”⁴³² However, the fourth interest declared by the State Department is unique to the South China Sea, and it is the codification of U.S. neutrality on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. As mentioned previously, the United States has not backed the claim of any of the South China Sea claimants, even those of its ally the Philippines.

Finally, it is important to note that some scholars argue that the United States was much more involved in the South China Sea than its policy of neutrality would suggest. U.S-China relations experts like Ambassador Freeman argue that the U.S.’s involvement in the SCS was far more complex and involved switching sides in these disputes during the Cold War. As Freeman recalls,

America had supported China’s claims in the Paracels and Spratlys. The U.S. Navy facilitated China’s replacement of Japan’s military presence in both island groups in 1945...[and] from 1969 to 1971, the United States operated a radar station in the Spratlys at Taiping Island, under the flag of the Republic of China.⁴³³

This U.S. presence in the South China Sea and support for the ROC’s claims could indicate that the U.S. was more involved than most accounts suggest. However, in terms of official policy, the U.S. avoided taking a stance on the issue of territorial sovereignty and mainly stayed out of the South China Sea disputes during this period.

2009-2012: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IN CONTEXT OF THE U.S. PIVOT TO ASIA

From 2009 to 2012, the U.S. began to slowly change its behavior and policies in the South China Sea. This shift was largely due to increasingly assertive Chinese activity in the SCS.

⁴³² Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴³³ Chas Freeman, “Diplomacy on the Rocks: China and Other Claimants in the South China Sea,” Providence, Rhode Island, April 10, 2015.
<https://chasfreeman.net/diplomacy-on-the-rocks-china-and-other-claimants-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

This Chinese assertiveness was prompted by a number of factors, but put simply, an economically robust and modernizing China began to chafe under U.S. geopolitical and military supremacy in East Asia, and began to exercise its capabilities to enforce its long standing policies.⁴³⁴ Similarly, the United States became wary of China's increasing military capabilities and began to view China as a true competitor.⁴³⁵ As Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri explain, growing U.S. concern over the South China Sea was influenced by both conventional and nuclear elements. From the conventional side, the U.S. became concerned about its ability to maintain its primacy in Asia. In terms of strategic nuclear deterrence, the Department of Defense began worrying about how China's naval and air projection in the South China Sea was connected to "its bastion strategy, whereby a safe 'bastion' is constructed for safeguarding its nuclear deterrent."⁴³⁶ Essentially, the DoD is concerned about China using the South China Sea to hide part of its nuclear triad. Despite these growing concerns, the U.S. still remained relatively neutral in terms of the SCS disputes until 2009 when the status quo of the various disputes in the South China Sea began to deteriorate, leading to a corresponding change in U.S. policy.⁴³⁷

There are several reasons for these changes to the status quo. The first two reasons are connected to larger geopolitical events not-specifically related to the South China Sea disputes themselves. The first was the Great Recession and its severe negative impact on Western

⁴³⁴ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 458. Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1faziJetlVXsNmTeHkyS5GJxnzIxW85Eq/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100499727363606636194&rtpof=true&sd=true>; Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via phone), April 2, 2024.

⁴³⁵ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴³⁶ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 458.

⁴³⁷ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 178.

economies.⁴³⁸ According to scholars like Gregory Poling, the Great Recession was seen in China as a sign of the United States' irreversible decline.⁴³⁹ This idea was also discussed by Dr. Heer, who said that there is a view that China interpreted the Great Recession as “an indicator to them that the U.S. was vulnerable, and that the Chinese should take advantage of that, and press their case against us.”⁴⁴⁰ Essentially, the Chinese saw the 2008 Financial Crisis as a sign that they could begin to challenge the U.S. dominance in East Asia and begin breaking from the Liberal World Order in peripheral areas like the South China Sea.

Second reason is that May 2009 was when the extended continental shelf claims under UNCLOS were due, which led to many South China Sea claimants to file claims that “significantly elevated tensions in the South China Sea.”⁴⁴¹ Under UNCLOS, states are entitled to claim an extended continental shelf beyond the 200 miles EEZ if they conduct extensive surveys and their claims are approved by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.⁴⁴² As part of this process, Malaysia and Vietnam submitted a joint claim on parts of the southern SCS, and Vietnam submitted a separate claim in the northern part of the South China Sea.⁴⁴³ China objected to these claims through a note to the United Nations Secretary General, which used the nine-dash line claim to sovereignty over all the features of the South China Sea, as well as the

⁴³⁸ The Great Recession was a global financial crisis lasting from 2007 to 2009. For more information see: <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-recession-and-its-aftermath>.

⁴³⁹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 178.

⁴⁴⁰ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴⁴¹ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 156.

⁴⁴² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 179.

⁴⁴³ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 179.

water and seabed. This claim was rejected by the other claimants, and the resulting claims and counterclaims led to a reinvigoration and escalation of the South China Sea disputes. As a result, scholars agree that after 2010 China became more assertive in the SCS⁴⁴⁴

Additionally, there were several SCS specific factors at play in this change in U.S. policy as well. First, greater assertiveness from China in the SCS “provided both a need and opportunity for the U.S. to pivot to Asia”, which would lead to “increased U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia to a level unseen since the end of the Vietnam War.”⁴⁴⁵ Second, there was a series of incidents between the U.S., its allies, and China in the South China Sea that prompted the U.S. to be more interested in the region. Two incidents that especially prompted the U.S. to rethink its SCS policy were the *USNS Impeccable* Incident and the Scarborough Shoal Stand-off.

The *USNS Impeccable* Incident of 2009 was an encounter where a U.S. navy surveillance ship, the *USNS Impeccable*, was dangerously harassed by China in international waters in the South China Sea.⁴⁴⁶ As the *Impeccable* was surveying waters south of Hainan Island, it was surrounded by five Chinese ships, three of which were military, two of which were part of state-sanctioned militia forces disguised as civilian fishing boats. The fishing boats tried to damage the *Impeccable*’s sonar array, but after they were driven away by high pressure water

⁴⁴⁴ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 178-180; Tongfi Kim, “U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 178.

⁴⁴⁵ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 178.

⁴⁴⁶ Sean R. Liedman, “The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 156; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 183.

hoses, one of the Chinese vessels stopped in front of the *Impeccable* forcing it to make an emergency stop to avoid collision. The military vessels then surrounded the U.S. ship.⁴⁴⁷

This incident, along with earlier dangerous encounters between Chinese and American military assets, such as the EP-3 Incident in 2001, arose from a disagreement between China and the U.S. about restrictions a littoral state is allowed to place on foreign military activities in its EEZ.⁴⁴⁸ The U.S. follows Article 87 of UNCLOS, which provides that the high seas are open to all States, including freedom of navigation and overflight, which include a littoral state's 200 mile EEZ.⁴⁴⁹ In contrast, China believes that UNCLOS allows for littoral states to put some restrictions on foreign activities in their territorial sea and EEZ, including prohibitions on military surveys and requirements of prior notice or consent to conduct military activities.⁴⁵⁰ This disagreement led the two nations to heatedly argue about the appropriateness of the other's behavior in the *Impeccable* Incident until President Obama and Secretary Clinton met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and they agreed to work to avoid such incidents in the future to protect U.S.-China relations.⁴⁵¹ However, as a show of strength, the U.S. sent the guided missile destroyer *USS Chung-Hoon* to "keep an eye" on the *Impeccable* as it returned to the SCS to complete the survey the Chinese vessels had interrupted.⁴⁵² This encounter between an

⁴⁴⁷ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 183.

⁴⁴⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 183.

⁴⁴⁹ Philip Jones et al, "CHAPTER 4: MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN AN EEZ," essay, in *Law of the Sea: A Policy Primer* (Boston, MA: Tufts University, 2017), <https://sites.tufts.edu/lawofthesea/chapter-4/>.

⁴⁵⁰ Raul Pedrozo, "CLOSE ENCOUNTERS AT SEA: The USNS *Impeccable* Incident," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 3 (2009): 101–12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26397037>.

⁴⁵¹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 184.

⁴⁵² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 184.

American ship exercising “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and Chinese vessels asserting Chinese sovereignty claims, raised U.S. concerns about China’s respect for international law and conduct in the South China Sea.

Similarly, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-off between the Philippines and China was another incident that changed how the United States perceived Chinese behavior in the SCS. The stand-off began in April 2012, when the Philippines arrested Chinese fishermen in Scarborough Shoal.⁴⁵³ The Philippines claimed the fishermen were fishing illegally, but the fishermen claimed they had a right to fish in the shoal and called Chinese law enforcement for help. The Chinese vessels arrived and blocked the Philippine Navy ship making the arrests from leaving the lagoon, leading to a stand-off between the Philippines and China over which side had sovereignty over the shoal.⁴⁵⁴ When negotiations between the two states failed, the Philippines internationalized the issue by calling for support from ASEAN, and claiming the Philippines would “maximize the benefits” of the US-Philippines MDT to resolve the standoff. This claim ultimately led the Philippines’ Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Alber del Rosario, and its Defense Secretary, Voltaire Gazmin, to meet with Secretary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in Washington on April 30.⁴⁵⁵ Clinton and Panetta reaffirmed the United States’ commitments under the Mutual Defense Treaty, but did not specify what those commitments were, nor did they offer an

⁴⁵³ Scarborough Shoal is an atoll in the South China Sea located in the Philippines’ EEZ. It has been effectively controlled by China since 2013, but due to international pressure has not been turned into an artificial island as of January 2024. For more information see: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-is-risk-conflict-disputed-scarborough-shoal-2023-09-26/>.

⁴⁵⁴ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 189.

⁴⁵⁵ This April 30, 2012 meeting was the first 2+2 meeting in the history of the U.S-Philippine alliance.

immediate solution. Instead, they gave the Philippines pledges for further capacity building measures to help the Philippines reach “a minimum credible defense posture” to deter China.⁴⁵⁶

When this pledge and further diplomatic efforts failed to resolve the standoff, Kurt Campbell, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, met with Fu Ying, former Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, in Washington D.C. He proposed that China and the Philippines simultaneously withdraw all their ships from the shoal and return to the *status quo ante*. If Fu Ying could remove the Chinese forces, Campbell would convince the Philippines to do the same.⁴⁵⁷ According to Poling, most American accounts of this meeting say that Fu agreed to the plan, and the U.S. upheld its end by convincing Manila to remove its boats from the shoal on June 15 under the pretense of an approaching typhoon.⁴⁵⁸ However, the Chinese did not. Fu claims that she told Campbell she could not promise a withdrawal, but thought “there would be no need” for the Chinese vessels to stay if the Filipinos withdrew. The Chinese Foreign Ministry also denied any agreement.⁴⁵⁹ The Philippines was outraged at China’s “bad faith negotiations,” but ultimately lacked the capacity to retake the shoal from China.⁴⁶⁰

For the United States, Scarborough Shoal served as a wake up call. China’s seizure of a feature in the Philippines’ EEZ, despite U.S. diplomatic involvement, showed the weakness of

⁴⁵⁶ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 190.

⁴⁵⁷ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 190-191.

⁴⁵⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 191.

⁴⁵⁹ This meeting between Campbell and Fu is the subject to various contesting accounts from the American and Chinese sides, and even some other Americans present at the meeting were unsure about whether the deal had been struck. Gregory Poling argues in *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* that the truth of what happened in this meeting will likely never be known.

⁴⁶⁰ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 191.

the United States' South China Sea policy.⁴⁶¹ Experts like Ely Ratner critiqued the U.S. as overly cautious during this crisis, and suggested that the U.S. needed to impose costs on China for its behavior in the SCS, even if that meant leveraging U.S. military muscle.⁴⁶² His suggestion would eventually be adopted in the following period from 2013-2023, where the memory of China's seizure of the shoal heavily influenced how the United States responded to future incidents between the Philippines and China.

Increased U.S. concern about Chinese behavior in the SCS was not the only policy change that occurred during this period. There were also several other shifts in the U.S.'s diplomatic approach to the region that indicated changing U.S. interests in the South China Sea. First, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a speech to ASEAN, which is cited by many scholars as a major indicator of the United States' changing approach to the South China Sea.⁴⁶³ She announced that the United States "has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea."⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024: "On the other hand, [the United States has] never been able or willing to try, to roll back or intervene in any of the steps the PRC has taken since the 1950's to reclaim what it considers lost territory...In this century our policy did not...stop the PRC from transforming its seven small holdings into man-made islands, building islands in the Spratlys. And, our policy did not stop it from grabbing Scarborough from under the Philippine's noses."

⁴⁶² Ely Ratner, "Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef," *The National Interest*, November 21, 2013. <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/learning-the-lessons-scarborough-reef-9442?page=0%2C1>.

⁴⁶³ Jian Yang, "Navigating the Volatile South China Sea," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 5 (2011): 2–6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45236133>; Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2022, 9.

⁴⁶⁴ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179; Clinton, Hillary. "Remarks at Press Availability." Press Conference at National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

This statement is important because it emphasizes that the United States is interested in the South China Sea, and clearly contradicts China's position on the SCS disputes.⁴⁶⁵

Second, the United States openly discussed the disputes at the East Asian Summit in November 2011. Despite China's objections, President Obama declared that "cooperation in the South China Sea" was one of the "shared challenges" to be discussed at the summit meeting,⁴⁶⁶ which directly contradicted China's desire to handle the South China Sea disputes bilaterally.⁴⁶⁷ This speech was also the beginning of a conflict between how the U.S. wants to settle the disputes and how China wants to resolve them. The United States prefers to internationalize the disputes to signal interest in the South China Sea and an increased willingness to uphold the LWO in the region, and China prefers to deal with claimants bilaterally.

Important Trends in the U.S. Policy Regarding the South China Sea from 2000-2012

There are three important trends in U.S. policy towards the South China Sea during this period. The first is that the U.S. began to grow concerned about Chinese actions in the South China Sea. This concern laid the foundations for greater U.S. intervention in future cases of "Chinese aggression." Second, this period began a trend of the U.S. prioritizing its regional allies, especially for the Philippines. This increasing interest in allies also introduced the need for the U.S. to maintain its credibility in the eyes of its allies as an important part of U.S. policy towards the SCS.⁴⁶⁸ Third, during this period the United States began to emphasize the importance of UNCLOS and international law. The U.S. often decried Chinese violations of

⁴⁶⁵ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179.

⁴⁶⁶ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 180.

⁴⁶⁷ Feng Zhu and Lingqun Li, "China's South China Sea policies" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 174.

⁴⁶⁸ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

international law and UNCLOS during this period, but China often dismissed U.S. objections since the United States had never officially ratified the treaty.⁴⁶⁹ This inherent hypocrisy of the United States claiming to defend UNCLOS and international law, while continually failing to legally ratify the treaty, is a U.S. domestic politics failure that continues to haunt U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea into the 2020s.

Additionally, it is important to note that even as the United States was growing more concerned about the South China Sea, and starting to push back against Chinese claims and behavior in the region, it still continued to cooperate with China. At this point, the U.S. still believed China could positively contribute to the existing Liberal World Order and did not want to break off this valuable bilateral relationship over the South China Sea. The United States' continued faith in China, as well as its desire to avoid escalating competition with the PRC, is made clear in a 2012 speech by Hillary Clinton, where she emphasized:

Today's China is not the Soviet Union. We are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia...A thriving China is good for America and a thriving America is good for China, so long as we both thrive in a way that contributes to the regional and global good.⁴⁷⁰

However, growing U.S.-Chinese competition and increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea would largely lead policymakers to abandon the idea that “a thriving China is good for America.”

2013- SEPTEMBER 2023: INCREASED COMPETITION, CONFRONTATION, AND RISK

From 2013 to September 2023, the United States became much more interested and active in the South China Sea, with policymakers increasingly worried about China's SCS claims

⁴⁶⁹ As of January 2024, the United States has signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, but the Senate has not ratified the treaty.

⁴⁷⁰ Hillary Clinton, “Forrestral lecture at the naval Academy,” Remarks at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, April 10, 2012.
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/04/187693.htm>.

and the actions it was willing to take to enforce them.⁴⁷¹ This greater interest and inclination to intervene in the South China Sea is clear in how Daniel Russel, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, laid out the United States' SCS objectives in 2015. According to Russel, they are (1) "protecting freedom of navigation and overflight;" (2) "honoring our alliance and security commitments;" (3) "aiding the development of effective regional institutions, including a unified ASEAN;" (4) "promoting responsible marine environmental practices;" (5) "fostering China's peaceful rise in a manner that promoted economic growth and regional stability;" and (6) "an international order based on compliance with international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes without the threat of force."⁴⁷²

Although these goals align with the U.S. policy interests established in 1995, the added objectives surrounding alliances, international law, and regional stability are part of a larger trend of increasing adversarial competition, and perhaps even confrontation, between the U.S. and China during the 2010s.⁴⁷³ This manifestation of U.S-China competition in the South China Sea appeared in three areas of U.S. policy: U.S. legal challenges to China's SCS claims, increased U.S. political and military attention to Chinese actions in the region, and U.S. attempts to create and leverage bilateral and multilateral relationships to balance against China.

First, U.S. challenges to China's SCS sovereignty claims during this time period mainly manifested in two ways: challenging the nine-dash line and supporting the Philippines' South

⁴⁷¹ Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024. Dr. Swaine argues that Hillary Clinton's 2010 speech "started off a process from 2010 on of the United States paying much greater attention to what the Chinese were doing there...but you got this kind of tit for tat response then, and it worsened in 2013 2014, with the Islands dispute, I mean artificial island development."

⁴⁷² Daniel R. Russel, "Remarks at the Fifth Annual South China Sea Conference," Remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, July 21, 2015. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/07/245142.htm>.

⁴⁷³ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024. Dr. Heer stated that: "US policy toward China has changed considerably over the last 20 years. It's become more competitive, I would say almost more confrontational, more adversarial, even."

China Sea Arbitration. During this period, the U.S. began to consistently criticize China's SCS claims represented by the nine-dash line map. As mentioned earlier, the nine-dash line is based on the concept of "historic rights," and in 2014 the United States rejected the legality of historic rights as inconsistent with UNCLOS.⁴⁷⁴ Additionally, the U.S. objected to the nine-dash line on the grounds that it overlaps with the EEZ's of other regional littoral states.⁴⁷⁵

Second, the United States challenged China's sovereignty claims in the SCS by supporting the Philippines' South China Sea Arbitration. In 2013, the Philippines challenged many of China's SCS claims before an *ad hoc* arbitral tribunal, established according to the rules laid out in Annex VII of UNCLOS.⁴⁷⁶ Specifically, the Philippines challenged the legality of the nine-dash line and asked the tribunal to establish that many of the features in the SCS were "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life on their own," a status which entitled these features to only a 12 mile territorial sea. The Philippines also requested the tribunal rule that China had illegally blocked Philippine fishing rights in areas like Scarborough Shoal, and to clarify that China had illegally occupied features like Mischief Reef. Finally, the Philippines asked that the tribunal rule on whether the Philippines was correct in asserting it has no overlapping EEZ claims with China.⁴⁷⁷ China was incensed by this arbitration, and openly refused to participate or accept any rulings from the tribunal.⁴⁷⁸ China kept its word and

⁴⁷⁴ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁷⁵ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁷⁶ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 198.

⁴⁷⁷ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 198.

⁴⁷⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 199.

ultimately dismissed the tribunal's 2016 ruling that China's nine-dash line and its historic rights claim was not supported by UNCLOS, and that all of the land features in the South China Sea are legally regarded as rocks incapable of generating EEZs.⁴⁷⁹

Although the United States did not directly participate in the case, "it called for all parties concerned, especially China, to respect the tribunal's ruling."⁴⁸⁰ Additionally, analysts like Ambassador Freeman argue that the U.S. was an influential factor in the Arbitration. Freeman asserts that the Philippines was only willing to force the arbitration because it could "hide behind" U.S. protection.⁴⁸¹ There is also little doubt that the United States ultimately benefited from the ruling, as this arbitration has become a significant diplomatic weapon against China's sovereignty claims and behavior in the South China Sea.⁴⁸²

The second key way U.S. policy changed during this period was greater U.S. political and military attention and responses to Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. One of the main driving factors of this greater U.S. interest and activity was China's island building campaign.⁴⁸³ Beginning in 2013-2016, China began building artificial islands on submerged reefs under its control in the South China Sea.⁴⁸⁴ As shown on the map displayed in figure 3.12, by 2016, China had turned seven reefs in the Spratly Islands into naval bases, with the artificial islands built on

⁴⁷⁹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁸⁰ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁸¹ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024.

⁴⁸² Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁸³ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024; Michael Swaine, interview by author, Chicago (via Zoom), January 17, 2024; Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁸⁴ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 178.

Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef each possessing a 3,000 meter airstrip and deep water port.⁴⁸⁵

Figure 3.12: Chinese Artificial Islands in the South China Sea



Source: Author⁴⁸⁶

According to Admiral Michael McDevitt, China has not made any major deployments of sea or air power to these bases, but they still concern the United States because they “changed the strategic balance of force in the southern part of the South China Sea,” and created the potential for China to build artificial islands much closer to Taiwan, such as at Scarborough

⁴⁸⁵ “China Island Tracker,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed February 06, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

⁴⁸⁶ Made using information from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>; 1. “What Is the South China Sea Dispute?,” BBC News, July 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>; https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia16/spratly_islands_sm_2016.gif.

Shoal. If China were to build more artificial islands in the northern portion of the SCS, that would “compromise almost all Filipino and US access points/bases in Luzon,” which in turn could interfere with the United States’ ability to protect Taiwan.⁴⁸⁷ When this island building began, Defense Secretary Charles Hagel condemned this campaign as destabilizing, and reiterated the United States’ opposition to the use of force or coercion to assert claims in the SCS. He also added a deterrent statement that “the United States will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged.”⁴⁸⁸ This threat was followed in 2015 by a bipartisan call from the Senate Armed Services committee for Secretary of State Kerry and new Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to create “a formal policy and clearly articulate strategy...to slow down or stop China’s reclamation activities.”⁴⁸⁹ Clearly, these artificial islands prompted much greater U.S. attention towards the SCS and this attention is on full display in the Second Thomas Shoal Incident in 2014 and the U.S. response to possible Chinese island building activities at Scarborough Shoal in 2016.

In 2014, the U.S. intervened to help the Philippines maintain its outpost on Second Thomas Shoal.⁴⁹⁰ This crisis, which has been reinvigorated in 2024,⁴⁹¹ arose when China

⁴⁸⁷ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴⁸⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 211-212.

⁴⁸⁹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 219.

⁴⁹⁰ Second Thomas Shoal is a submerged reef in the Spratly Islands. As of January 2024, it is controlled by the Philippines, who maintain a Marine outpost on the feature in the form of the intentionally grounded ship, the *BRP Sierra Madre*.

⁴⁹¹ In 2024, there is an ongoing standoff over the Sierra Madre and Second Thomas Shoal, with China harassing the Philippine resupply missions with water cannons and risky maneuvers. For more information, see: Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, “China Attacks Philippine Ship, Injures Crew in Latest Escalation of South China Sea Standoff,” *the United States Naval Institute News*, March 23, 2024. <https://news.usni.org/2024/03/23/china-attacks-philippine-ship-injures-crew-in-latest-escalation-of-south-china-sea-standoff>.

blockaded the Philippines' outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, the intentionally grounded ship the *BRP Sierra Madre*, and threatened to starve the marines stationed there. During this standoff, the U.S. sent the *USS Blue Ridge* to Manila, and Vice-Admiral Robert Thomas announced that: "Without going into hypotheticals, the Seventh Fleet is going to support this alliance, period."⁴⁹² At the same time, President Obama warned President Xi not to use force at Second Thomas Shoal on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in the Hague. However, the greatest show of U.S. force came when the Philippines decided to run the Chinese blockade on March 28. As the Philippine ship, full of international journalists and supplies for the *Sierra Madre*, ran the Chinese blockade, a U.S. P-8A Poseidon plane flew overhead, low enough to be easily identified by all those aboard the ship. The Philippine mission was ultimately successful, and some authors like Gregory Poling and Michael McDevitt argue that this result was largely due to U.S. intervention.⁴⁹³ This claim is supported by a contemporary Philippine military source, who speculated, "had the U.S. Navy planes not made low passes over your ship and the *Sierra Madre*, the China Coast Guard could have been more aggressive in blocking you."⁴⁹⁴ This greater show of U.S. force was likely prompted by the precedent set by the Scarborough Shoal Stand-off, which soured the United States' trust in diplomatically resolving such crises.

Another example of greater U.S. reactions to Chinese behavior in the South China Sea occurred in 2016, when the United States intervened to stop China from turning Scarborough Shoal into an artificial island. Chinese survey ships had been spotted around the shoal, raising fears that China was planning to build another artificial base there. As a result, President Obama

⁴⁹² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 204.

⁴⁹³ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁴⁹⁴ Cited in Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 204.

warned President Xi at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington that “Scarborough was a redline for the United States.”⁴⁹⁵ The U.S. followed that deterrent statement with the largest joint exercise between the Philippines and U.S. to date, Balikatan 2016. Afterwards the U.S. sent U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolts to conduct an “air and maritime domain awareness mission” around Scarborough. President Obama’s warning and this U.S. show of force apparently caused China to recall its survey ships, and analysts declared the Chinese withdrawal a tactical victory for the U.S. However, this “victory” did not return Scarborough Shoal to the Philippines, nor did it permanently remove the threat of a Chinese base at Scarborough.⁴⁹⁶

Aside from these specific interventions, the most exemplary of the changes in overall U.S. policy towards the South China Sea was the rise in attempts to deter what the U.S. views as “Chinese aggression” in the South China Sea through statements⁴⁹⁷ and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). FONOPs are operations conducted by U.S. navy vessels⁴⁹⁸ to intentionally challenge foreign maritime claims, rules, or laws that the United States considers excessive and non-compliant with international law.⁴⁹⁹ Ostensibly, FONOPs are an “operational demarche” of a diplomatic protest, and are used when diplomatic protests fail to pressure foreign governments.

⁴⁹⁵ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225.

⁴⁹⁶ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225. It is important to note that despite cries of victory from U.S. analysts and former officials, the Pentagon would not confirm the operation or its intentions, leading to contemporary criticism that the White House had “muzzled” Pacific Command.

⁴⁹⁷ For example, then US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis stated in 2017 at the Shangri-La Dialogue that America “cannot and will not accept unilateral, coercive changes to the status quo.” U.S. Department of Defense, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Shangri-La Dialogue,” Transcript, Jun. 3, 2017. For more information see Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459.

⁴⁹⁸ In cases of Freedom of Overflight, the U.S. employs the Airforce to challenge a country’s excessive airzone or airspace claim.

⁴⁹⁹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 221.

They also establish a record of U.S. noncompliance to support future negotiation or challenges.⁵⁰⁰

From 2013-September 2023, the United States conducted greater numbers of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, especially around the Spratlys because of concerns that China would declare another non-compliant baseline around these features.⁵⁰¹

Finally, another change in U.S. policy towards the South China Sea can be clearly seen in its attempts to use multilateral partnerships, bilateral alliances, and security agreements to balance against China. During this period, the United States engaged in new partnerships throughout Southeast Asia, including signing a Comprehensive Partnership with Vietnam in 2013,⁵⁰² and a Comprehensive Partnership with Malaysia in 2014.⁵⁰³ At the same time, it strengthened its existing security agreements in the region, namely with the Philippines. In 2014, the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which was designed to build on the existing MDT and strengthen the Philippines military through capacity building.⁵⁰⁴ Furthermore, the United States finally clarified in 2019 that its MDT obligations extend to

⁵⁰⁰ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 221.

⁵⁰¹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459. Whether China has already declared a straight baseline through the Spratlys is a matter of debate. There are scholars that claim China has declared a baseline through the Spratlys, such as Sean R. Liedman in "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea" in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 163; However scholars like James Kraska claim China has only declared straight baselines through the Paracel Islands and Senkaku Islands, see: Kraska, James. "Chapter 9 China's Excessive Straight Baseline Claims". In *Peaceful Maritime Engagement in East Asia and the Pacific Region*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Nijhoff, 2022) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004518629_010.

⁵⁰² This relationship was upgraded to a strategic comprehensive partnership in 2023, which signals a significant improvement of relations between the two countries. Although, this upgrade does not necessarily focus on military and security aspects. For specifics, see the official statement issued by both governments: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

⁵⁰³ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 163.

⁵⁰⁴ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 461-462.

Philippines' military forces, vessels, and aircraft in the South China Sea. As Secretary of State Pompeo said at a joint Press conference with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin in March 2019:

As an island nation, the Philippines depends on free and unobstructed access to the seas. China's island-building and military activities in the South China Sea threaten your sovereignty, security, and therefore economic livelihood, as well as that of the United States. As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.⁵⁰⁵

This statement was important because it gave the Philippines the clarification it had wanted during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-Off and raised the threat of the United States becoming involved in a conflict between the Philippines and China in the SCS. Admiral McDevitt argues that the U.S. made this clarification because it “judged that the possibility of direct US military involvement the best way to deter China's use of force against any of the Philippine garrisons in the Spratlys.”⁵⁰⁶ He also argued that the U.S. likely saw this commitment as a way to facilitate U.S. access to Philippine military facilities, for example in Luzon, which would be useful in case of a threat against Taiwan.⁵⁰⁷

Finally, the U.S. worked with multilateral institutions to help Southeast Asian SCS claimants balance against China. This trend can be seen in Washington's efforts to engage with ASEAN as a regional organization, including through maritime exercises like the Cooperation Readiness and Afloat Training (CARAT), which it held in the South China Sea for the first time in 2019.⁵⁰⁸ The U.S. has also tried to use multilateral economic measures to counteract Chinese

⁵⁰⁵ For the full statement, see:

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>.

⁵⁰⁶ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁵⁰⁷ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁵⁰⁸ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 462.

influence in the region, including the Better Utilisation of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act passed in 2018. This act provided \$60 billion USD for “the newly-established US International Development Finance Corp (IDFC) to support infrastructure development in Asia and Africa.”⁵⁰⁹ However, scholars like Dr. Heer claim that although security agreements have been successful, the United States has often been disappointed by its multilateral efforts due to division within ASEAN.⁵¹⁰

Key Changes to the United States’ South China Sea Policy 2012-September 2023

In summary, three key changes occurred in the United States’ SCS policy during this period from 2013-September 2023. The United States began to legally challenge China’s South China Sea claims, increase its political and military attention to Chinese actions in the SCS, and further invest in bilateral and multilateral attempts to balance against China. These three changes are clearly represented in the United States’ decision to clarify its stance on the maritime claims in the South China Sea in 2020. The State Department announced that the United States was officially aligning its position on the PRC’s maritime claims in the SCS with the 2016 Arbitral ruling and declaring the PRC’s claims illegitimate under international law.⁵¹¹ The statement went even further and openly supported the Philippines’ maritime claims within its EEZ, including its claims to Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, and Second Thomas Shoal. This statement shows how the U.S. sought to legally challenge China’s claims in the SCS, paid greater attention to

⁵⁰⁹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 462.

⁵¹⁰ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁵¹¹ Pompeo, Michael. “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea.” Press Statement, July 13, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

China's behavior in the region, and placed greater emphasis on the importance of allies and alliances in balancing against China's aggressive behavior in the SCS during this time period.

Another important trend during this period was the United States' increased defense of its definition of Freedom of the Seas, and the elevation of FONOPs as a primary policy tool. There are two main reasons why FONOPs became such a prevalent and important component of U.S. policy in the South China Sea during the decade from 2013 to 2023. The first was that policymakers promoted FONOPs as a policy tool and increasingly discussed FONOPs as a way to exercise deterrence. Although the U.S. employs FONOPs to challenge excessive maritime claims of both allies and adversaries, Poling argues that during this period they took on "a symbolic importance wildly out of proportion to their original intent" in the South China Sea.⁵¹² For example, in 2015 the Senate Armed Services Committee repeatedly asked Admiral Harry Harris of the U.S. Pacific Fleet about how the U.S. was employing FONOPs in the SCS to support its criticism of China's artificial island building campaign. When he revealed the U.S. was not conducting FONOPs near the artificial island, the committee put pressure on the Pentagon to conduct FONOPs near these features to assert that underwater features were not entitled to a territorial sea. Poling argues this pressure was based on a misunderstanding of FONOPs and how they are used to challenge Chinese claims.⁵¹³

The second reason FONOPs in the South China Sea increased during this period was because of leadership and bureaucratic problems during the Trump Administration. As Poling recounts, the Pentagon was "wholly responsible for South China Sea Policy" during the Trump Administration because many important executive positions and ambassadorships were simply

⁵¹² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 221.

⁵¹³ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 221-222.

left empty.⁵¹⁴ Even once these positions were filled, the Secretary of Defense would send the list of FONOPs to President Trump for bulk approval, leading to a FONOP in the SCS every six weeks from May 2017 until the end of the Trump Administration.⁵¹⁵ Although there is debate about the effectiveness of the U.S. FONOPs in the SCS, and whether a conflict could truly erupt from a collision between U.S. FONOP vessel and the People's Liberation Army Navy ships that inevitably shadow it,⁵¹⁶ there is a threat that leaves something to chance when a U.S. military vessel enters waters that China claims to exercise sovereignty over.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how the United States' policy regarding China and the South China Sea has undergone several transformations over the last twenty years. The United States' China policy changed over the course of four distinct periods. First, the U.S. sought to contain China during the early Cold War. Then it changed to a policy of rapprochement and cooperation with China during a period of Optimistic Engagement. Next, during the early 2000s the U.S. slipped into weary engagement during a period of Cooperation Under Growing Suspicion. However, cooperation largely ended as the U.S. and China slid towards increasing competition after 2012. Similarly, the United States was officially neutral regarding the South China Sea until 2008, and then from 2009-2012 became increasingly concerned about Chinese behavior in the

⁵¹⁴ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 236.

⁵¹⁵ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 236.

⁵¹⁶ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024; Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024. Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024.

SCS. Later, during the 2010s, the U.S. truly began to challenge China's claims in the South China Sea and devote significant attention to the region.

Although these periods of U.S. policy towards China and U.S. policy towards the SCS do not line up exactly, the escalation in the United States' interest and willingness to intervene in the South China Sea only makes sense when contextualized in larger U.S-China relations. While the U.S. and China were cooperating during the 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. did not want to damage relations over the South China Sea, so it largely maintained its neutrality. However, as China became more powerful during the late 2000s and the United States pivoted to Asia from 2009 to 2012, the U.S. began to pay closer attention to China's behavior in the SCS and push back against China's policies. Finally, once U.S-China competition truly began to escalate during the 2010s, that competition also manifested in the peripheral area of the South China Sea, where the United States became much more active in its approach to challenging China's excessive sovereignty claims, protecting its interpretation of international law, and employing its alliances to balance against China. It is clear in 2023 that the South China Sea has become another site for U.S-China competition, and as Li and Atmakuri argue, "US-China rivalry in the South China Sea is likely to remain unabated in the future as strategic competition has now become a more prominent feature in the overall bilateral relations."⁵¹⁷

However, what this history does not explain is how exactly U.S. policy changed and the role the United States' position as hegemon played in its policy towards the South China Sea. Chapter one highlighted that the U.S has no real stake in the South China Sea Disputes, so why is it competing with China in the South China Sea? Why would a hegemon like the United States choose an area peripheral to its interests to confront a rising power? Chapter four seeks to answer

⁵¹⁷ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, "US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea" in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 460.

these questions by moving past history and examining how the U.S. behaved in the South China Sea. This chapter will track quantitative markers of U.S. activity and examine key U.S. policy documents to explain how U.S. behavior and policy changed over time, reveal U.S. motivations and intentions towards the South China Sea, and elucidate trends in hegemonic behavior.

CHAPTER 4

U.S. POLICY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The South China Sea is the example of foreign policy original sin. The U.S. was very tolerant of our friends staking territory in disputed areas. And then, when China decided it was strong enough to stake its own claims in disputed areas, the U.S. talked a tough game of resisting that, but, in fact, we refused to make serious commitments to defense

—Douglas Paal, interview with author

This chapter examines quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions posed in chapter one: how has the United States’ policy towards China changed in peripheral areas between 2000 and September of 2023? And to what extent does hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas change during times of instability in the global world order? This chapter examines quantitative data and qualitative data over my entire time frame (2000-September 2023), as well as three separate periods within this timeframe: a Nascent Period (2000-2008), a “Pivot Period” (2009-2012), and a Transformative Period (2013-September 2023).

This empirical chapter begins with an assessment of my quantitative data, consisting of data related to United States freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, U.S. joint exercises in the SCS, and U.S. foreign military financing to the Philippines. I selected these datasets because they provide information on manifestations of U.S. policy, can be used to measure U.S. involvement in the SCS, and can be analyzed as methods used by the U.S. to signal its intentions regarding the South China Sea to both allies and adversaries. I also chose these markers because they are either consistently present over the timeframe of this study, or represent significant data for one of my three periods. My analysis of this quantitative data

highlights overarching key trends in each dataset. I then conclude this quantitative section with a discussion of the sources for the data and figures.

Next I examine the qualitative evidence for this study, which consists of seven important U.S. policy documents about the South China Sea. I analyze each of these documents in chronological order, summarizing their contents and examining the rhetoric of these documents where appropriate. For example, I focus on content over rhetoric in the case of the two legal studies of maritime claims in the South China Sea, as its contents are more useful for making inferences about U.S. intentions, interests, and perceptions than its appropriately neutral, scholarly, and legal rhetoric. I enhance my own analysis by bringing in information, opinions, and analysis obtained from eleven interviews with subject matter experts. I conclude this section by highlighting the broader trends throughout these documents or large scale changes displayed by these documents. Overall, this qualitative analysis is used to examine how U.S. policy has changed over time, as well as investigate how U.S. rhetoric and perception regarding this vital region have also changed.

Finally, this chapter concludes with an examination of the overarching trends in U.S. policy towards the South China Sea presented by both the quantitative and qualitative data. My analysis of the quantitative and qualitative revealed interesting changes in U.S. policy, motivations, attitude, and strategy, as well as three overarching findings. First, the United States changed from being a reactive actor to a proactive actor in the South China Sea, and shifted from issuing broad policies to specific policies. Second, the U.S. increasingly prioritized allies in its SCS policy and made greater attempts to internationalize the issue from 2000 to 2023. Finally, both the qualitative and quantitative markers reveal that the United States became more interested and involved in the South China Sea over time.

QUANTITATIVE DATA: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION PROGRAM, BILATERAL EXERCISES, AND FOREIGN MILITARY FINANCING

I identified and examined three categories of data made up of five quantitative markers of U.S. policy in the South China Sea. The first category is the United States' Freedom of Navigation Program, which includes data on the number of U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and the number of Chinese maritime claims the U.S. has deemed excessive in nature. The second category is U.S. bilateral exercises in the SCS, which includes data on the number of U.S. forces involved in Exercise Balikatan (hereafter Balikatan) and the number of countries involved in Maritime Training Exercise (MTA) Sama Sama. Finally, the third category is the dollar amount of U.S. foreign military financing (FMF) given to the Philippines. All these datasets are measured annually. I will provide context for each dataset below, before explaining the data and analyzing key trends that pertain to this study.

DATA ON THE FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION PROGRAM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

As previously discussed in chapter 3, freedom of navigation is a longstanding U.S. interest. The United States protects this interest through the Freedom of Navigation Program, which began in 1979.⁵¹⁸ Although the Freedom of Navigation Program contains both diplomatic and operational components, its original intention was mainly diplomatic in nature. The Department of State determines the excessive nature of the claim and which article/tenet of UNCLOS and international law that claim breaks. It then issues a diplomatic protest to the non-compliant country. If that protest is ignored, the Department of Defense is then instructed to

⁵¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program," February 28, 2017. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/DoD%20FON%20Program%20Summary%2016.pdf?ver=2017-03-03-141350-380>.

conduct the operationalization of that diplomatic protest through a freedom of navigation operation.⁵¹⁹ Since FONOPs are not a threat of U.S. action, they are mainly supposed to call attention to the excessive claim, and thus compel the targeted country to withdraw it. However, since the 2010s FONOPs have increasingly taken on a more deterrent connotation among U.S. policymakers and the media, especially in the case of China.⁵²⁰

It is also important to highlight that the U.S. conducts FONOPs against both allies and adversaries. For example, in 2022 the United States conducted FONOPs against the excessive claims of friendly countries like Barbados⁵²¹ and Taiwan, as well as hostile states such as Russia and Iran.⁵²² Therefore, the U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program should not be interpreted as a program aimed at containing China, but rather one of several different tools the U.S. uses to challenge any maritime claims that break with the Liberal World Order and the existing Maritime Order of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Yet, even with this context, China still stands out as a clear target of the Freedom of Navigation Program, as the U.S.

⁵¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2020,” Washington D.C., January 27, 2021.

<https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY20%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁵²⁰ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jPlMfGEJHTVgw9pGhDv1RMaw5fWg_m428nbmXJM3Pfw/edit?usp=sharing; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 221-222.

⁵²¹ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Barbados,” *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/barbados/#:~:text=U.S.%20Relationship&text=other%20forms%20of-,The%20United%20States%20and%20Barbados%20have%20had%20friendly%20bilateral%20relations,of%20living%20for%20its%20citizens>.

⁵²² U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2022,” Washington D.C., December 6, 2022. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2022.pdf?ver=8of4c3mCAOnzfa4AfTYIyg%3d%3d.

conducts a significant number of FONOPs against China, and has deemed more Chinese claims “excessive maritime claims” than those of any other country.⁵²³

With this background on the U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program in mind, the following graphs display two different datasets related to freedom of navigation. The first dataset displayed in figure 4.1 measures the number of U.S. freedom of navigation operations conducted against China in the South China Sea annually from 2000 to 2023. Figure 4.1 displays both the minimum possible number of FONOPs conducted in a year and the maximum number. The second dataset shown in figure 4.2 shows the number of Chinese maritime claims the U.S. has deemed “excessive in character” and challenged via the Freedom of Navigation Program every year. I examined both these datasets because the number of freedom of navigation operations indicates a U.S. willingness to operationally challenge China and a U.S. presence in the South China Sea, while the number of excessive claims represents the United States’ official position on maritime claims and indicates significant interest in a country and its claims.

Explaining Figures 4.1 and 4.2:

Figure 4.1 displays the maximum and minimum number of possible FONOPs in a given year. Both the maximum and the minimum number are included because there are discrepancies between media, scholarly, and government sources on the number of FONOPs for most years. For example, Jeff Smith writing for Foreign Policy in 2021 reported that there was one FONOP in 2015, four in 2017, and nine in 2020.⁵²⁴ However, a Congressional Research Office Report,

⁵²³ U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2022,” Washington D.C.: December 6, 2022. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2022.pdf?ver=8of4c3mCAOnzfa4AfTYIyg%3d%3d.

⁵²⁴ Jeff M. Smith, “Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation,” Foreign Policy, February 16, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south-china-sea-spratlys/>.

citing FONOPs data directly from the U.S. Navy, reported that there were two FONOPs in 2015, six in 2017, and eight in 2020.⁵²⁵ Yet that same report also compiled numbers of FONOPs based on press reports, and found that the general media had reported ten different FONOPs conducted in the SCS in 2020.⁵²⁶ In particular, there appears to be underreporting in the media prior to 2015, and based on the Congressional Research Report, the media seems to have only started earnestly tracking U.S. FONOPs in 2017. Similarly, the Navy does not report any data on FONOPs in the SCS prior to 2012.⁵²⁷ This bias means that there are more data gaps earlier in the record. Since there is no way of determining which of these numbers is “correct” I included both to ensure that no data was accidentally lost or distorted.

There are a number of reasons for these discrepancies. The first is that the Department of Defense reports freedom of navigation operations for every fiscal year, which stretches from October 1st of one year to September 30th of the following year.⁵²⁸ This difference between U.S. Government fiscal years and regularly measured temporal years could cause certain FONOPs to be counted by the Navy in one year, but by scholars and the media in another. For example, a FONOP that occurred in fiscal year 2020 could be counted by scholars as occurring in 2019, or 2020 depending on whether it occurred before or after October 1st, 2019. Another reason for the

⁵²⁵ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, R42784, February 5, 2024: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784>, 37.

⁵²⁶ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, R42784, February 5, 2024: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784>, 35.

⁵²⁷ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, R42784, February 5, 2024: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784>, 35; Jeff M. Smith, “Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation,” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south-china-sea-spratlys/>.

⁵²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2022.” Washington D.C., December 6, 2022. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2022.pdf?ver=8of4c3mCAOnzfa4AfTYIyg%3d%3d, 4.

discrepancy is certain freedom of navigation operations could be subject to some level of classification. If certain FONOPs are classified to some degree, the U.S. Government would be unable to discuss them publicly, even to congress. Perhaps the media discovered these FONOPs and included them in their numbers, but officially the U.S. Government cannot include these operations in their counts of FONOPs. Similarly, perhaps a FONOP flew under the radar and the Navy reported it, but it did not receive significant media attention. Either of these situations could explain the variation in the number of FONOPs for a given year. These discrepancies mean that the data displayed in Figure 4.1 is biased towards more recent years when both the media and government published more reports on the number of FONOPs in the South China Sea. This bias does not negate the overall trends displayed in figure 4.1, but does make sure this data is more useful for examining overarching trends than for making inferences about U.S. activity in a specific year. It also means that any significant changes that appear on the graph before 2012, must be examined cautiously.

Additionally, figure 4.1 is also missing data for 2007-2011 because no specific numbers for FONOPs in the SCS were reported in any media sources, scholarly articles, or documents publicly published by the U.S. government. The only reason there is data from 2000-2007 is because no FONOPs against China were reported in the Department of Defense's Annual Report to Congress on the Freedom of Navigation Program.⁵²⁹ Although there were FONOPs conducted against China from 2008-2011, their location is not specified in these reports. Therefore, these FONOPs could have occurred in areas like the East China Sea, and were not included in the graph to avoid contaminating the data or creating misleading trends. Both the lack of concrete

⁵²⁹ The Department of Defense is required to provide Congress with an annual report on the countries it conducts FONOPs against, and what type of claim it is challenging. After 2017 it began specifying the geographic location of these excessive claims, and in 2018 it began reporting the specific foreign law or declaration used to make an excessive claim. Annual DoD Freedom of Navigation Program Reports from 1992-present are available in this digital database: <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSSDP-Offices/FON/>.

numbers and missing data from 2007-2011 mean that figure 4.1 should only be interpreted as representing overall trends in U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, figure 4.2 tracks the number of Chinese claims that the U.S. determined were non-compliant with UNCLOS and subsequently challenged with FONOPs from fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2022. The gap in figure 4.2 from FY2001 to FY2006 represents a time period where the U.S. apparently did not challenge any Chinese excessive claims according to DoD reports.⁵³⁰ Additionally, it is important to note that many of these challenged claims are repetitive, and once the DoS deems a claim excessive and non-compliant with UNCLOS, the DoD tends to challenge it year after year. Although the State Department does appear to either remove excessive claims or combine two similar enough claims and challenge them together over time.⁵³¹ Furthermore, it is important to note for figure 4.2 that the Department of Defense only began specifying where these claims were geographically located in 2017.⁵³² Therefore this figure represents U.S. objections to all excessive Chinese maritime claims, even those outside the SCS. However, based on the reports after 2017, the overwhelming majority of Chinese claims that the U.S. deems excessive are located in the South China Sea, so this figure still generally represents the United States' policy regarding China's maritime claims in the SCS.

⁵³⁰ See the Undersecretary of Defense digital database of Freedom of Navigation Reports for Fiscal Years 2001-2006: <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/FON/>.

⁵³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2020," January 27, 2021, <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY20%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2021," December 2, 2021. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2021.pdf.

⁵³² U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2017," December 13, 2017. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/FY17%20DOD%20FON%20Report.pdf?ver=2018-01-19-163418-053>.

Figure 4.1: Number of FONOPs Aimed at China in the South China Sea (2000-2023)

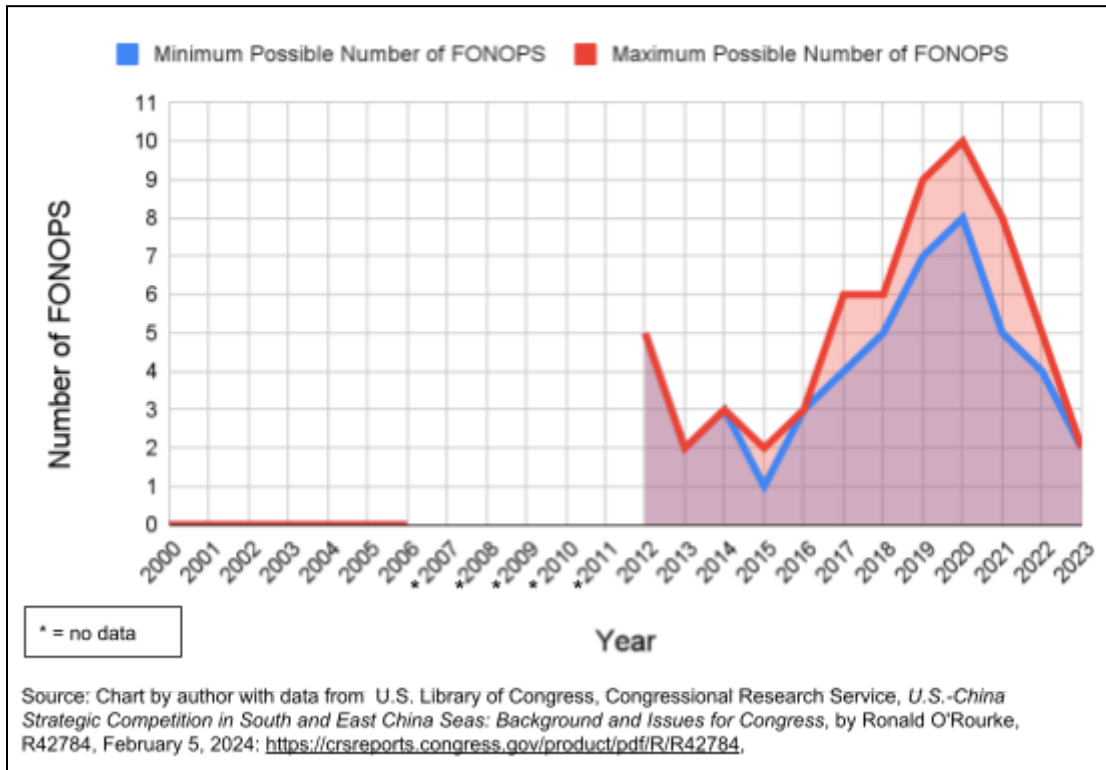
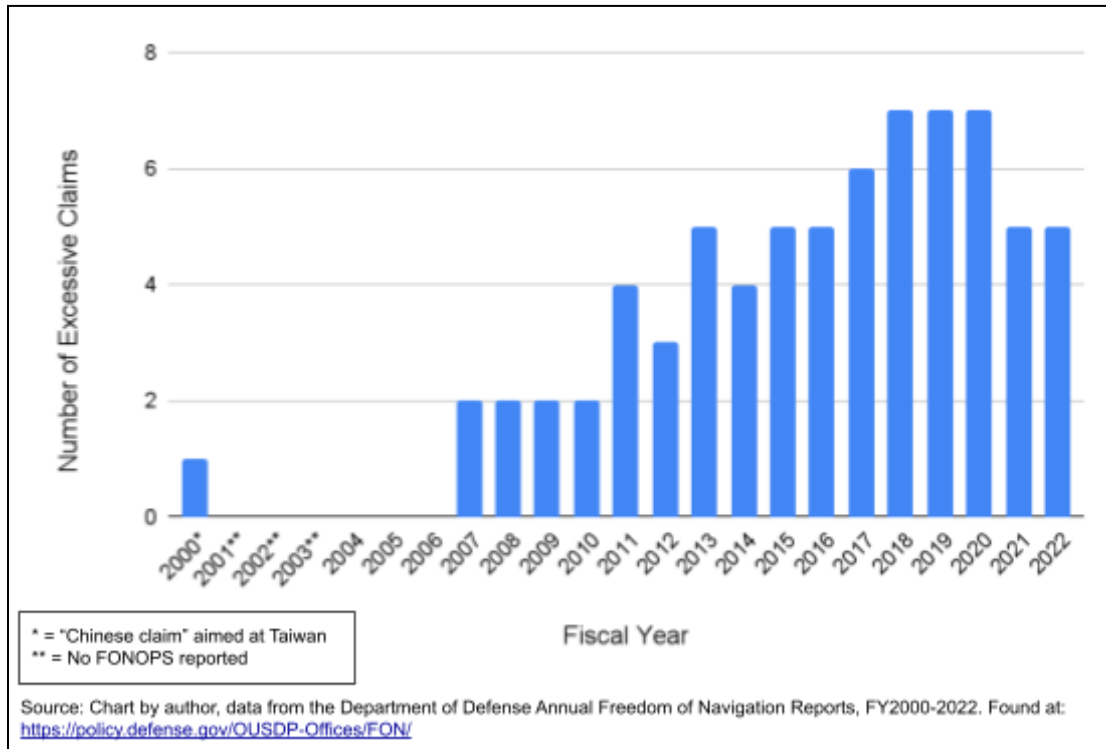


Figure 4.2: The Number of Chinese Excessive Claims Challenged by FONOPs (FY2000-FY2022)



Data Analysis of Figures 4.1 and 4.2:

As shown clearly in figure 4.1, the number of U.S. FONOPs in the South China Sea grew from 2012 to 2020, with the most significant period of increase occurring from 2015 to 2020. The number of FONOPs then decreased back to 2015 levels from 2022-2023. Placing it in the context of U.S. presidential administrations, there were barely any FONOPs during the Bush Administration (2000-2007). Then the number of FONOPS fluctuated, but were relatively low during the Obama administration (2008-2016). The highest year for FONOPs during the Obama Administration was five in 2012. However, the number of FONOPS sharply increased during the Trump Administration (2017-2020), with the U.S. conducting a maximum of ten freedom of navigation operations in 2020. Finally, the number of FONOPs has so far decreased during the Biden administration (2021-present).

Similarly, figure 4.2 displays a clear increase in the number of Chinese claims deemed excessive by the U.S. government and then challenged by FONOPs. With the exception of 2001, which is in fact a discrepancy since that excessive claim was made by Taiwan, the United States did not begin challenging Chinese excessive claims in the South China Sea until 2007.⁵³³ That number then began increasing every year from 2014 to 2018, reaching seven challenged claims in 2018 and remaining constant until 2020. The number of excessive claims then decreased to five in 2021 and remained stable. The majority of these excessive claims are the Chinese claims discussed in Chapter 3, such as the PRC's misuse of baselines and excessive claims to maritime and airspace "to which it is not entitled under UNCLOS."⁵³⁴ It is also important that after 2011

⁵³³ William Cohen, "Annual Report to the President and Congress," Washington D.C.: 2001, <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/gsa/cwmd/FY2000%20DOD%20Annual%20FON%20Report.pdf>.

⁵³⁴ For example, see: U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2017," Washington D.C, December 13, 2017. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/FY17%20DOD%20FON%20Report.pdf?ver=2018-01-19-163418-053>; U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2017," Washington D.C, February 18, 2020. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY19%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2>.

the U.S. tends to challenge more of China's excessive claims than those of any other country.⁵³⁵ For example, in 2022, the U.S. challenged five Chinese maritime claims, by far the highest number that year. The next highest number of claims challenged was two from Iran and two from the United Arab Emirates.⁵³⁶

There are several reasons for the increase in freedom of navigation operations and U.S.-challenged excessive Chinese claims. One specific to FONOPs is that over the past ten years approving freedom of navigation operations has become increasingly routine. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Sbragia explained in an interview that during the 2000s and early 2010s the State Department and the White House would often refuse to approve FONOPs because they were seen as too provocative.⁵³⁷ However, since roughly 2012 the approval process has become routine to the point where today FONOPs against the Chinese are approved as almost a standard practice. Additionally, Poling points out that during the Trump Administration, the Secretary of Defense would have the president approve FONOPs in bulk, instead of on a case by case basis as was the process during the Obama administration.⁵³⁸

Three other reasons help explain both the increase of freedom of navigation operations and the increase in Chinese claims that the U.S. deems excessive. First, both these data markers likely increased as a result of U.S.-China competition. As Former Assistant Secretary Sbragia and Dr. Smith both explained in interviews, the result of primacy and strategic competition is

⁵³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "FY2011 DOD Annual FON Report," October 2011. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/gsa/cwmd/FY2011%20DOD%20Annual%20FON%20Report.pdf>.

⁵³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2022." Washington D.C., December 6, 2022. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2022.pdf?ver=8of4c3mCAOnzfa4AfTYIyg%3d%3d.

⁵³⁷ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJtvr5reH1f0mojTJI3Ejs-iXdEDKFt8G7CgfAoIn6o/edit?usp=sharing>.

⁵³⁸ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 236.

that more and more issues become viewed in light of that competition. Therefore, as U.S.-China competition intensified, the South China Sea and China's excessive claims within it were viewed as increasingly important and threatening. Therefore, the United States increasingly took steps to counter China in the region, including objecting to Chinese maritime claims through the Freedom of Navigation Program.

Second, the variation in numbers of FONOPs and challenged Chinese claims is connected to the approaches of the four different administrations towards China. As covered in chapter 3, the Bush Administration viewed China as a strategic competitor, but did not make China a priority because it was preoccupied by the War on Terror, wars in the Middle East, and the beginning of the Great Recession. In contrast, the Obama Administration did prioritize China and was hopeful regarding U.S-China relations. However, the Trump Administration took a much more hawkish approach that heightened U.S. China competition, which was mellowed by the Biden Administration's approach of emphasizing "safeguards" to manage U.S.-China strategic competition.⁵³⁹ With this context in mind, the U.S. likely increased the number of FONOPs conducted in the SCS during the Trump Administration in light of that hawkish approach. Similarly, the Biden administration's continued focus on competition is likely why the U.S. continues to conduct FONOPS in the SCS at levels equal to or higher than the Obama Administration.

A third reason has to do with Chinese capabilities. As Dr. Holmes and Dr. Ryan Martinson discussed in their respective interviews. China was not seen as much of a threat during the 2000s. The U.S. did not perceive the PRC as having the military capabilities to back up its

⁵³⁹ Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024..

maritime or territorial claims in the South China Sea, or anywhere else.⁵⁴⁰ Therefore, it is logical to assume that the U.S. would only invest the time and resources in challenging an excessive claim and conducting a FONOP if that claim is enforceable and in danger of being accepted due to the capabilities of the claimant state. With this in mind, the number of Chinese claims the U.S. deems “excessive” and challenges with FONOPs can be analyzed as one sign of the United States’ changing perception of Chinese capabilities. The U.S. challenged more claims over the course of this twenty year period because it perceived China to increasingly have the capabilities to enforce those claims.

Finally, both these datasets feature interesting gaps that seem to indicate changing U.S. interests in the South China Sea and China’s maritime claims. As discussed above, figure 4.1 is missing data from 2007-2011 and figure 4.2 shows that there were no U.S. challenges to Chinese claims from 2002-2006. The gap in figure 4.1 could be the result of a lack of digitized records of these FONOPs or preserved media reporting on them, but more likely the gap in figure 4.1 data gap and the absence of U.S challenges to Chinese claims from 2001-2006 in figure 4.2 result from a lack of U.S. attention and interest in the South China Sea. The United States was engaged in the War on Terror after 2001, and by 2008 both the state and media’s attention was focused on the 2008 Financial Crisis. It is possible that these two geopolitical issues dwarfed the disputes in the SCS and ensured that any freedom of navigation operations were directed at Chinese behavior in the East China Sea towards Japan and Taiwan, or were deemed so insignificant that the media simply did not report on them. Additionally, it is possible that with budget cuts and the reluctance of the State Department to approve FONOPs, the U.S. simply did not conduct them in the SCS during this time period.

⁵⁴⁰ Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1faziJetlVXsNmTeHkyS5GJxznzIxW85Eq/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100499727363606636194&rtpof=true&sd=true>; James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

With all this context in mind, it is clear that figures 4.1 and 4.2 show that the United States became much more active in the South China Sea in defending freedom of navigation after 2012. These figures also indicate that there was a major hardening of positions against China in the SCS during the Trump Administration, when U.S.-China competition was at its most intense. Overall this data also demonstrates a change in U.S. attitude towards China and China's maritime claims. The increase in FONOPs and China becoming the most challenged country are evidence that China's claims in the South China Sea became increasingly important to the United States over this twenty year period. Although the Trump Administration can be viewed as an anomaly, the United States' hawkish foreign policy from 2017-2020 likely escalated U.S.-China competition in the SCS, explaining why the Biden administration's FONOP numbers and challenges to Chinese claims are still high compared to early in the Obama administration. This data indicates that the U.S. is still greatly concerned about China's claims and its ability to assert them.

DATA ON U.S. ANNUAL BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL EXERCISES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The United States conducts numerous bilateral and multilateral exercises with allies and partners all around the world. These exercises are often meant to increase nations' ability to work together on issues like humanitarian aid, peace keeping, and combat preparedness. They are also used to signal the close relationship between the U.S. and other countries participating.⁵⁴¹ There are two annual bilateral exercises in the South China Sea. The largest is Exercise Balikatan

⁵⁴¹ Terri Moon Cronk, "U.S. Forces Work With Partners in Numerous Military Exercises," *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 17, 2017.
<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1250003/us-forces-work-with-partners-in-numerous-military-exercises/>.

(hereafter Exercise Balikatan or just Balikatan), an annual bilateral exercise with the Philippines that began in 1991.⁵⁴² *Balikatan* is a Tagalog word meaning “shoulder-to-shoulder” and this exercise is meant to “promote readiness, interoperability, friendship, and security,” as well as highlight “the deep-rooted partnership between the Philippines and the United States.”⁵⁴³ Operationally, Balikatan involves joint-training between the Philippines and American armed forces, civic assistance projects, humanitarian aid, and infrastructure building.⁵⁴⁴ The second annual U.S. bilateral exercise connected to the South China Sea is Maritime Training Exercise Sama Sama, which began in 2017. *Sama Sama* is Tagalog for “togetherness,”⁵⁴⁵ and aims to strengthen the U.S.-Philippine alliance. Notably, MTA Sama Sama focuses on increasing the interoperability and warfighting capabilities of both nations, and helping the Philippines address “mutual security concerns” including piracy, maritime domain awareness, and disaster relief preparedness.⁵⁴⁶ Additionally, although both of these exercises are called “bilateral exercises,” they are actually increasingly multilateral in nature. MTA Sama Sama 2023 involved the United

⁵⁴² Sebastian Strangio, “Philippines, US Kick Off Large-Scale Balikatan Military Exercise,” *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-us-kick-off-large-scale-balikatan-military-exercise/>.

⁵⁴³ U.S. Embassy in Manila, “U.S. AND PHILIPPINE FORCES SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDE 37TH BALIKATAN,” *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, April 8, 2022. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-philippine-forces-successfully-conclude-37th-balikatan/>.

⁵⁴⁴ U.S. Embassy in Manila, “U.S. AND PHILIPPINE FORCES SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDE 37TH BALIKATAN,” *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, April 8, 2022. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-philippine-forces-successfully-conclude-37th-balikatan/>.

⁵⁴⁵ Aira Genesa Magdayao, “3rd iteration of ‘Joint MTA Sama-Sama 2019’ officially opens,” *Palawan News*, October 15, 2019. <https://palawan-news.com/3rd-iteration-of-joint-mta-sama-sama-2019-officially-opens/>.

⁵⁴⁶ Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific, “US, Philippines, Japan Conclude Maritime Training Activity Sama Sama,” Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, October 21, 2019. <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1993414/us-philippines-japan-conclude-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/>.

States, the Philippines, Japan, Australia, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom.⁵⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Australia has participated in Exercise Balikatan since 2014.⁵⁴⁸

Data for these bilateral exercises consists of the numbers of troops involved in Exercise Balikatan and the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama from 2000-September 2023. These markers are used to assess U.S. military commitment to the region and are analyzed as attempts to signal U.S. intentions to support its ally in the SCS. Additionally, these exercises can be seen as deterrent signals to the Chinese, which display the strength of U.S. regional alliances and the United States' willingness to bring its forces and allies to bear should China attempt to infringe on Philippine sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Explaining Figures 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5:

Figure 4.3 displays numbers of U.S. forces involved in Exercise Balikatan relative to the total number of combined forces participating in the exercise. Figure 4.4 tracks these same numbers, but adds the number of Philippine troops involved annually in Exercise Balikatan. Not shown in the graphs are the numbers of Australian troops involved, as their numbers have never exceeded 100,⁵⁴⁹ and therefore were difficult to accurately portray when compared with the thousands of U.S. and Filipino forces involved. It is important to note for these figures that there is no data reported before 2012 because there are no records on numbers of forces involved in

⁵⁴⁷ Rebecca Moore, "US, Philippines Partner with Allies During Exercise Sama Sama 2023," *U.S. Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)*, October 2, 2023. <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3545630/us-philippines-partner-with-allies-during-exercise-sama-sama-2023/>.

⁵⁴⁸ Isis Ramirez, "BALIKATAN 2014 COMES TO A CLOSE," *Marines*, May 23, 2014. <https://www.okinawa.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/504735/balikatan-2014-comes-to-a-close/>.

⁵⁴⁹ Australian Government, Australia supports cornerstone Exercise in the Philippines," *Australian Government: Defence*, April 28, 2023. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2023-04-28/australia-supports-cornerstone-exercise-philippines>.

Balikatan exercises prior to that year. Additionally, Exercise Balikatan was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic,⁵⁵⁰ and Balikatan 2021 was significantly scaled down due to health concerns.⁵⁵¹ Therefore these aberrations in the data in figures 4.3 and 4.4 must be viewed as a result of the pandemic and not indicative of overall U.S. policy. Another important trend is that although only the U.S., Philippines and Australia regularly participate in Balikatan, Japan participated in 2017 and 2018, and ASEAN and the United Kingdom have both participated as observers.⁵⁵² The introduction of the U.K. into this regional exercise is likely the result of AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia for the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁵³

Figure 4.5 tracks the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama. When the exercise first began in 2017, only the U.S. and the Philippines participated. However, after Japan joined in 2019, new countries joined the exercise every year, especially after MTA Sama Sama 2022 was conducted jointly with Lumbas, an Australian and Philippine bilateral exercise. Although there was no official announcement that MTA Sama Sama had been canceled due to COVID-19, the lack of military and U.S. Philippine Embassy press releases about MTA Sama

⁵⁵⁰ United States Indo-Pacific Command, “U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Cancels Balikatan 2020,” *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, March 26, 2020. <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2127794/us-indo-pacific-command-cancels-balikatan-2020/>.

⁵⁵¹ U.S. Embassy Manila, “U.S. AND PHILIPPINE FORCES CONCLUDE 36TH BALIKATAN EXERCISE,” U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, April 23, 2021. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-philippine-forces-conclude-36th-balikatan-exercise/>.

⁵⁵² ASEAN observed in 2019, see: <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1801132/uss-wasp-spmagtf-4-arrive-in-the-philippines-for-exercise-balikatan/>.

⁵⁵³ Renato Cruz De Castro, “PHILIPPINES ENHANCES TIES WITH AUKUS,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, December 13, 2021. <https://amti.csis.org/philippines-enhances-ties-with-aukus>. As part of AUKUS, the United States and the United Kingdom agreed to help Australia obtain nuclear powered submarines, with the fissile material provided by the United States. For more information see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210927191633/https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines-through-new-trilateral-enhanced-security>.

Sama 2020 indicate that it was canceled due to the pandemic. Therefore the lack of data for 2020 in figure 4.5 should not be viewed as indicative of U.S. policy, but a result of COVID-19.

Figure 4.3: Numbers of U.S. Forces Involved Annually in Exercise Balikatan

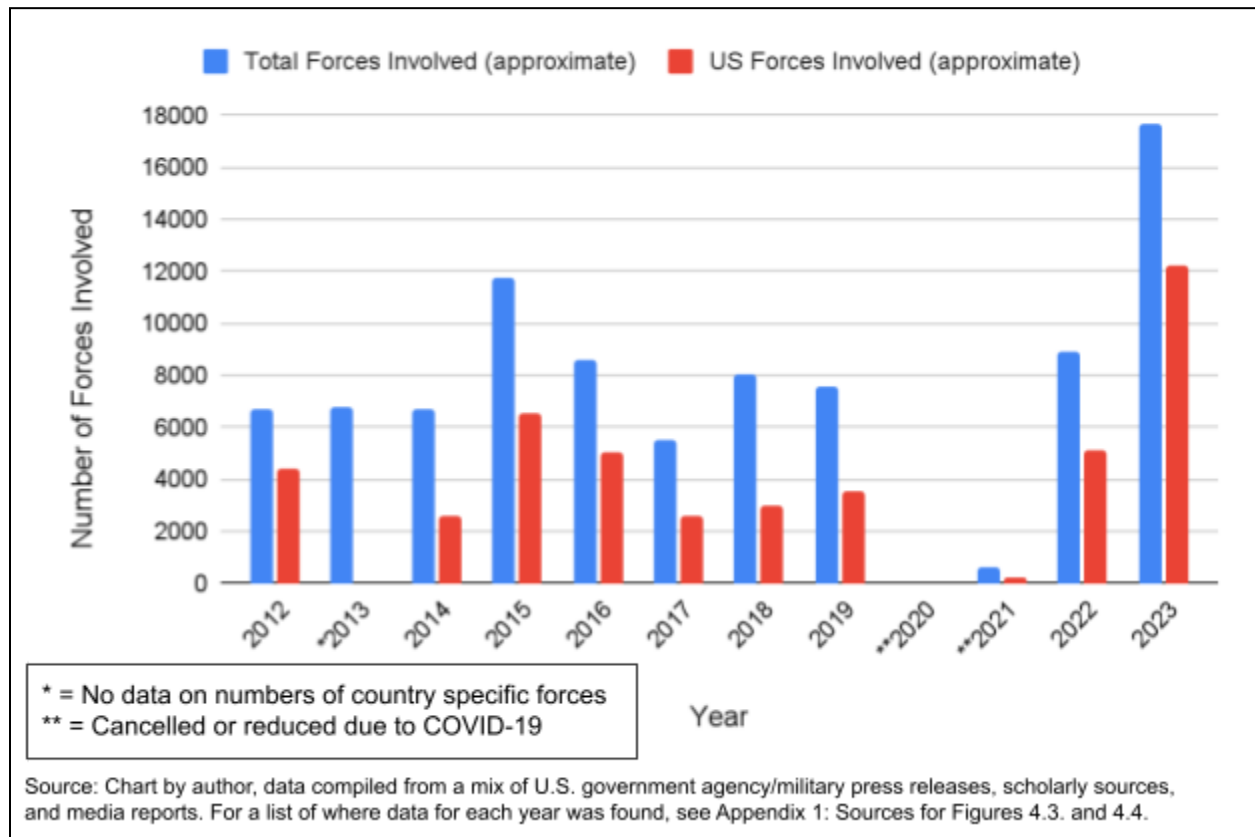


Figure 4.4: Numbers of U.S. vs. Philippine Forces Involved Annually in Exercise Balikatan

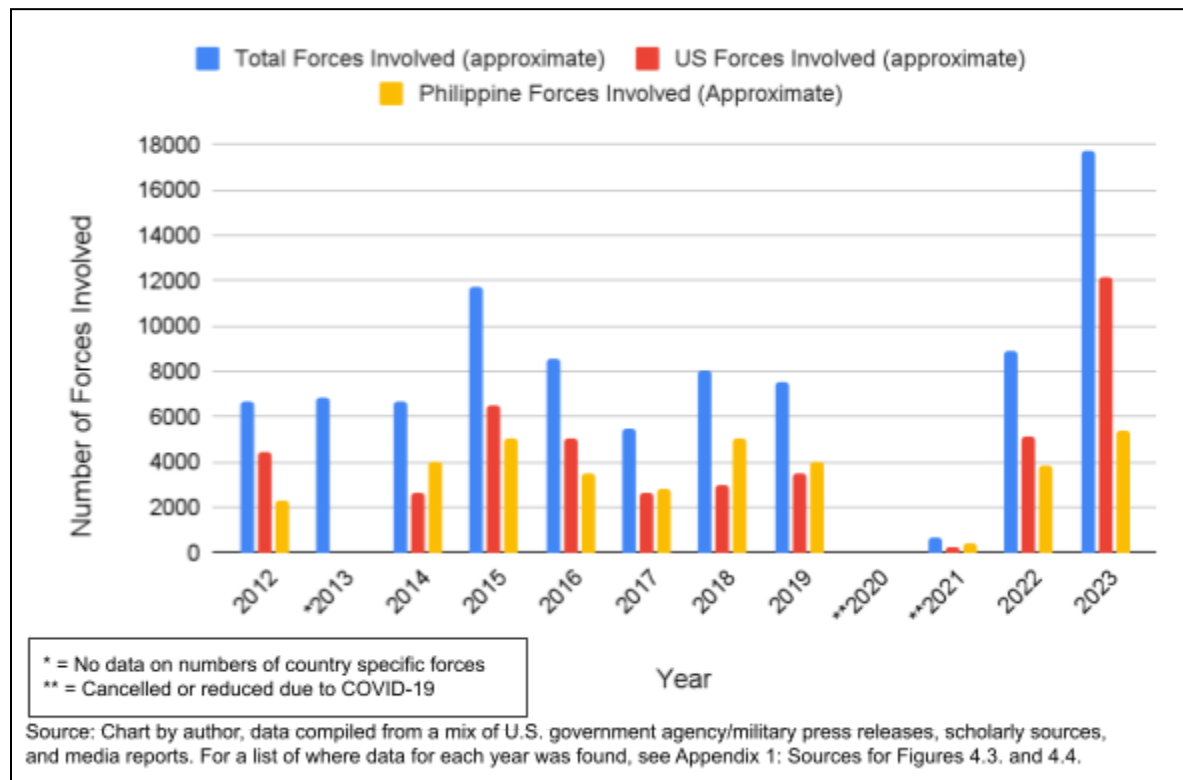
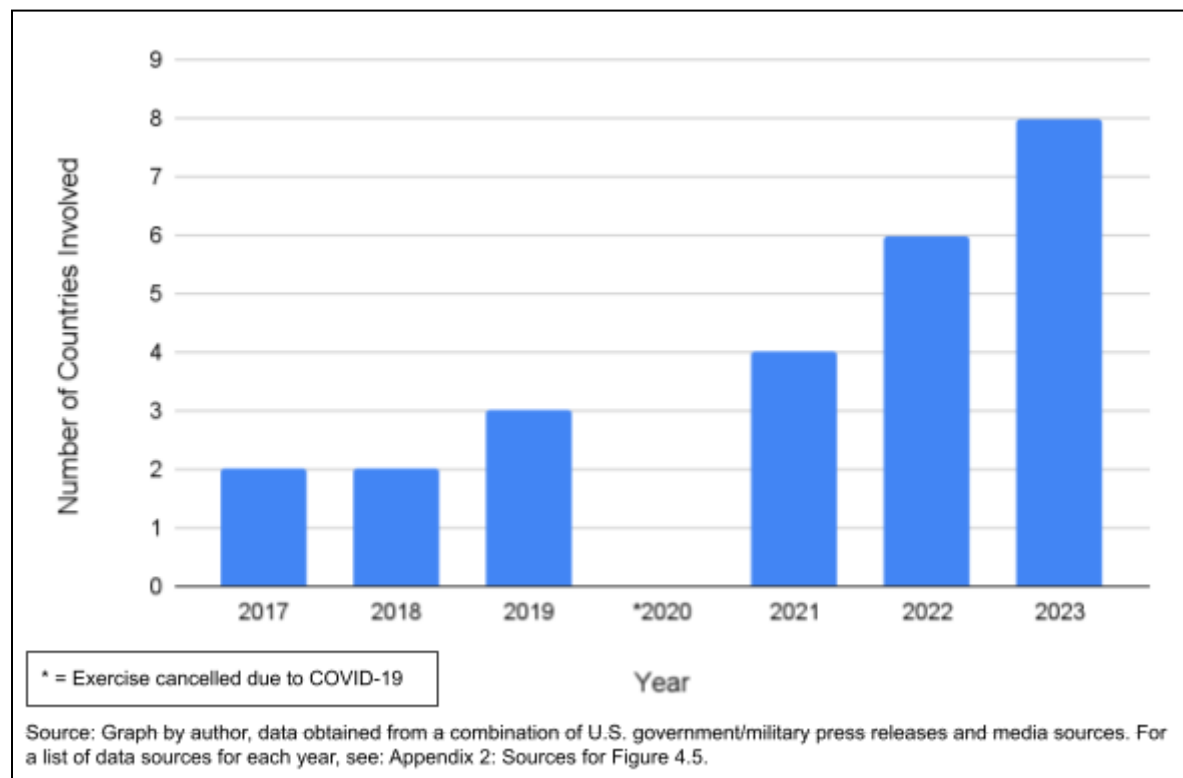


Figure 4.5: Number of Countries Participating in MTA Sama Sama



Data Analysis:

The data in figures 4.3 and 4.4 paint an interesting picture of U.S. participation in Balikatan and overall U.S. commitment to the Philippines and South China Sea. In terms of figure 4.3, the number of U.S. forces involved in Balikatan increased from 2012 to 2015, before decreasing significantly in 2016 and continuing to drop in 2017. Then U.S. force numbers begin to rise again in 2018, and continue to increase after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. Similarly, figure 4.4 shows an interesting change in the ratio of U.S. to Philippine forces from 2012 to 2023. The U.S. provided the majority of the forces involved in Balikatan in 2012, 2015 and 2016, even when U.S. troops overall were decreasing. However from 2017-2019 the Philippines provided the majority of the forces for the exercise. After COVID-19, the United States began providing the majority of the personnel again, and 2/3rd of the forces involved in Balikatan 2023 were American..

Meanwhile, figure 4.5 shows how the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama steadily increased over time. There was an increase of one country every year from 2019 to 2021, and then that increase doubled to add two new countries every year from 2022-2023. By 2023, the number of countries had increased to eight, with Australia, Canada, France, Japan, Malaysia, and the U.K. all participating in MTA Sama Sama alongside the United States and the Philippines.

The variation in U.S. forces involved in Balikatan can be explained in two ways. The first is that U.S. involvement in Balikatan represents the U.S.-Philippine alliance. The United States has said that Exercise Balikatan is one of many manifestations of the U.S-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty,⁵⁵⁴ so it would be logical for U.S. troops involved in Balikatan to reflect the state

⁵⁵⁴ U.S Department of Defense, “The United States and the Republic of the Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines,” Washington D.C: May 3, 2023.

of larger U.S.-Philippine relations. The decrease in U.S. forces involved in Balikatan from 2015 to 2017 is most likely the result of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's pro-China policy, where he ended most joint-exercises with the U.S.,⁵⁵⁵ derided U.S. credibility as an ally, and sought to improve Sino-Philippine relations. President Duterte even threatened to end the Visiting Forces Agreement in 2018.⁵⁵⁶ In this context, it makes sense that the U.S. would send less forces to Balikatan, as the U.S. Government was likely reluctant to display strong support for an ally openly speaking of ending its agreement with the U.S., and the Philippines was trying to minimize the alliance.⁵⁵⁷

However, by 2019 Sino-Philippines relations had not markedly improved, nor had China stopped its harassment of Philippine fishermen or ships in the South China Sea, which put pressure on the Duterte Administration to return to the U.S. alliance. Simultaneously, the U.S. adopted a new policy in 2019, which stated that the MDT applied to Philippine forces and assets in the South China Sea. Both these factors significantly improved relations.⁵⁵⁸ 2019 was also the year that Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative first argued the types of exercises involved in Balikatan were connected to events in the SCS. Balikatan 2019 included warfighting exercises, live-fire activity, amphibious operations, and "a naval exercise modeling the seizure of an island

<https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/03/2003214357/-1/-1/0/THE-UNITED-STATES-AND-THE-REPUBLIC-OF-THE-PHILIPPINES-BILATERAL-DEFENSE-GUIDELINES.PDF>.

⁵⁵⁵ Exercise Balikatan obviously escaped this general cessation of U.S.-Philippine bilateral exercises.

⁵⁵⁶ Gregory Poling, "The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

⁵⁵⁷ Gregory Poling, "The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

⁵⁵⁸ Gregory Poling, "The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

in the South China Sea by combined Filipino and American forces.”⁵⁵⁹ The media also began connecting Philippine issues in the South China Sea and Balikatan in 2022.⁵⁶⁰

Second, the trends in U.S. forces involved in Balikatan, as well as the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama, can be contextualized in broader U.S.-China competition for allies and influence in the region. With China looming, increased numbers of U.S. troops, especially in relation to Filipino troops, could indicate U.S. commitment to the Philippines and the larger region. The ratio of U.S. to Philippine forces as shown in figure 4.4 could also imply an increased U.S. willingness to support and protect its ally. Similarly, the increasing size of Balikatan and number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama could act as both signals of commitment from the U.S. to China regarding this region, as well as deterrent signals to the PRC.

I infer from these trends that the U.S. is using these functionally multilateral exercises to display both its military capabilities and its strong network of alliances in order to deter China from threatening the Philippines or claiming more islands in the South China Sea. This inference is supported by the rhetoric used to discuss Balikatan and MTA Sama Sama. For example, Indo-Pacific Command discussed Balikatan in context of the “Free and Open Pacific,”⁵⁶¹ and Admiral Karl Thomas, Commander of the U.S. 7th Fleet, described the multilateralism displayed

⁵⁵⁹ Renato Cruz de Castro, “BALIKATAN 2019 AND THE CRISIS IN PHILIPPINE-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 23, 2019 <https://amti.csis.org/balikatan-2019-and-the-crisis-in-philippine-china-rapprochement/>.

⁵⁶⁰ Sebastian Strangio, “Philippines, US Kick Off Large-Scale Balikatan Military Exercise,” *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-us-kick-off-large-scale-balikatan-military-exercise/>; Jim Gomez and Aaraon Favila, “US, Filipino forces start war drills in region facing Taiwan,” *Associated Press*, March 28, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/china-taiwan-philippines-manila-armed-forces-f985b504e922d2db06e124e9a4578d26>.

⁵⁶¹ U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, “37th Iteration of Balikatan Exercise Set to Begin in the Philippines,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), March 22, 2022. <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2974746/37th-iteration-of-balikatan-exercise-set-to-begin-in-the-philippines/>.

in MTA Sama Sama-Lumbas 2022 as showing the “agreement between our leadership that the only way to truly uphold the rules- based international order is together.”⁵⁶² The phrases “Free and Open Pacific” and “rules based international order” are hallmarks of U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea. Finally, the addition of the United Kingdom to Balikatan as an observer and MTA Sama Sama as a participant is likely meant to highlight the strength of AUKUS as a regional security alliance and further internationalize the disputes in the South China Sea.

UNITED STATES FOREIGN MILITARY FINANCING FOR THE PHILIPPINES

The United States provides allies and partners with a variety of different foreign assistance and foreign aid aimed at enhancing military capabilities, infrastructure, government, civil society, and more.⁵⁶³ Foreign Military Financing (FMF) is one of these programs, and it “enables eligible partner nations to purchase U.S. defense articles, services, and training through either Foreign Military Sales (FMS)⁵⁶⁴ or, for a limited number of countries, through the foreign military financing of direct commercial contracts (FMF/DCC) program.”⁵⁶⁵ Essentially, FMF provides allies and partners with grants so they can buy “U.S. defense equipment, services, and training.” The State Department uses FMF to ensure that “friendly foreign governments” possess

⁵⁶²Mohammed Issa, “Multilateral exercise Sama-Sama Lumbas 2022 concludes,” Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CPF), October 19, 2022. <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3193619/multilateral-exercise-sama-sama-lumbas-2022-concludes/#:~:text=Combined%20Philippine%2DU.S.%20and%20Philippine,Philippines%20and%20the%20Sulu%20Sea.>

⁵⁶³ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard,” *foreignassistance.gov*, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2019/obligations/0>.

⁵⁶⁴ The U.S. Government’s program for transferring defense articles, services, and training to international partners and organizations. It is a program where allies and partners can purchase defense articles directly from the U.S. government. For more information see: [https://www.dsca.mil/foreign-military-sales-faq#:~:text=Foreign%20Military%20Sales%20\(FMS\)%20is,international%20partners%20and%20international%20organizations.](https://www.dsca.mil/foreign-military-sales-faq#:~:text=Foreign%20Military%20Sales%20(FMS)%20is,international%20partners%20and%20international%20organizations.)

⁵⁶⁵ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “FOREIGN MILITARY FINANCING (FMF),” *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*. <https://www.dsca.mil/foreign-military-financing-fmf>.

the capabilities to support U.S. security goals, “share burdens in joint missions” and strengthen U.S. led coalitions. Foreign Military Financing also helps foster “closer military relationships between the United States and recipient nations.”⁵⁶⁶

Explaining Figure 4.6:

Figure 4.6 tracks U.S. Foreign Military Financing to the Philippines from 2001 to 2022. FMF is far from the only military-focused foreign aid the United States gives the Philippines, but unlike other military foreign assistance programs, such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative which began in 2016,⁵⁶⁷ FMF is consistently given to the Philippines year after year. This consistency makes it a useful marker for examining U.S. policy and behavior over my twenty year period. Additionally, FMF tends to fluctuate along with broader U.S. assistance sectors.⁵⁶⁸ FMF is almost always rated as one of the top foreign assistance activities⁵⁶⁹ between the U.S. and the Philippines in the U.S. Foreign Assistance dashboard. 2011⁵⁷⁰ and 2001⁵⁷¹ are the only two years where FMF was not listed in the top three U.S. foreign assistance activities.

⁵⁶⁶ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “Key Topics – Office of Security Assistance,” *U.S. Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/about-us-office-of-security-assistance/>.

⁵⁶⁷ The Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative is a program that began in FY2016, and specifies seven Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) nations for assistance and training: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. For more information see: <https://www.dsca.mil/section-1263-indo-pacific-maritime-security-initiative-msi>.

⁵⁶⁸ The State Department categorizes foreign assistance by distinct sectors that describe what the program does (e.g. health, security, energy, agriculture). The international sector classification is based on the international standard maintained at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC).

⁵⁶⁹ The Department of State defines a U.S. foreign assistance activity as “An activity is any assistance project, program, cash transfer, delivery of goods, training course, research project, debt relief operation, or contribution to an international organization.”

⁵⁷⁰ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard,” *foreignassistance.gov*, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2011/obligations/0>.

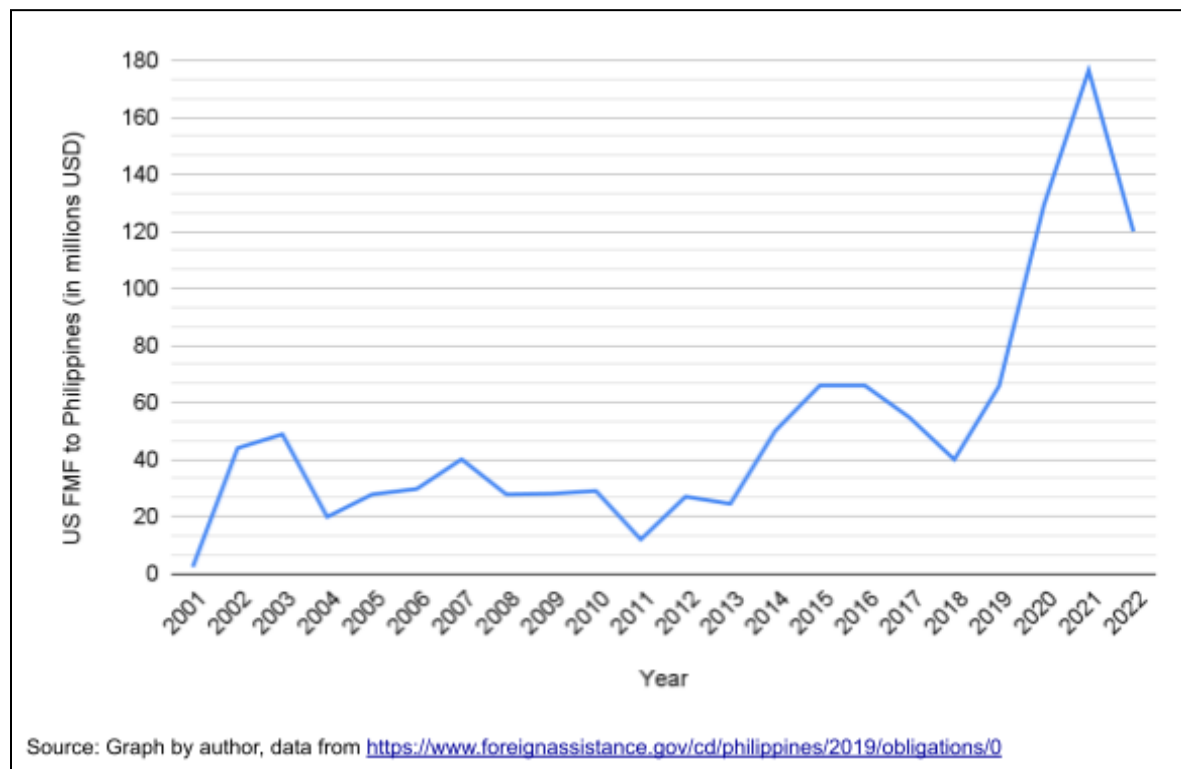
⁵⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard,” *foreignassistance.gov*, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2001/obligations/0>.

Similarly, most years the greatest sector of U.S. foreign assistance is “Conflict, Peace, and Security.” The one period of exception was from 2001 to 2005, when the greatest sector was “Developmental Food Aid” and the War on Terror.⁵⁷² The only other years when “Conflict, Peace, and Security” was not the top sector for U.S. foreign assistance was 2011, when it was “Transport and Storage” and 2014 when the greatest sector was “Emergency Response following Typhoon Yolanda.”⁵⁷³ Therefore the FMF data displayed in figure 4.6 should be viewed as indicative of broader U.S. military aid, as well as which sector of the Philippines the United States is most interested in assisting. However, it does not represent the entirety of the U.S. Military aid to the Philippines.

⁵⁷² U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard,” *foreignassistance.gov* <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2003/obligations/0>.

⁵⁷³ Super Typhoon Yolanda, also known as Typhoon Haiyan, was one of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever recorded. It affected Palau, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China during early November 2013, with the Philippines experiencing the most devastation and a death toll in the thousands. Many consider it to be the country’s worst natural disaster. For more information see: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Super-Typhoon-Haiyan>.

Figure 4.6: US Foreign Military Financing to Philippines (in millions USD) Per Year



Data Analyses:

There is significant variation in the amount of FMF the U.S. provided the Philippines over the years. The data contains three notable peaks. The first is in 2003 and is likely connected to U.S. efforts to increase Philippine capabilities as part of the War on Terror.⁵⁷⁴ The next peak occurs in 2015 and 2016, and could be explained in context of the U.S. trying to shore up its alliance with the Philippines during the early years of the Duterte Administration. Finally, the peak in 2021 is likely connected to attempts by the U.S. and Philippines to revitalize and

⁵⁷⁴ Center for Strategic & International Studies, “The Forgotten War on Terror: How the United States Overmilitarized Counterterrorism in the Philippines,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies, the Represent Series*, January 28, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/forgotten-war-terror-how-united-states-overmilitarized-counterterrorism-philippines>.

modernize their alliance after the Duterte Administration, which included implementing the Enhance Cooperation Defense Agreement.⁵⁷⁵

From a broader geopolitical perspective, the rapid increase in FMF is also likely influenced by U.S.-China competition and Philippine concerns about China in the SCS, both of which have prompted the U.S. to help the Philippines build the capacity to defend itself against China.⁵⁷⁶ Meanwhile the dips in FMF in figure 4.6 imply periods where the U.S. did not prioritize military assistance to the Philippines. As discussed above, from 2001 to 2005 the greatest sector of U.S. foreign assistance to the Philippines was generally “Developmental Food Aid.” In that context, the 2004 dip in FMF makes sense since FMF is not vital to food assistance programs. Similarly, the U.S. prioritized the sector of “Transport and Storage” in 2011⁵⁷⁷ and “Emergency Response” following Typhoon Yolanda in 2014 rather than military aid. Therefore the dip in 2011 and leveling off of FMF levels in 2013 and 2014 make sense given those priorities. Finally, the drastic decrease in FMF from 2016-2018 represents the poor state of U.S.-Philippine relations under the Duterte Administration. Similar to the decrease in U.S. troops in Balikatan, the U.S. probably was reluctant to provide extensive military financing to an ally who was openly seeking to reconcile with China.

Therefore this FMF data shows how security, peace, and conflict have always been a U.S. interest in the Philippines, but that the U.S. commitment to help the Philippines progress in this

⁵⁷⁵ Gregory Poling, “The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

⁵⁷⁶ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, “Philippine Air Base Gets U.S.-Funded Upgrade Under China Deterrence Plan,” *U.S. Naval Institute*, January 29, 2024. <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/29/philippine-air-base-gets-u-s-funded-upgrade-under-china-deterrence-plan#:~:text=The%20Philippines%20Department%20of%20National,communication%2C%20fueling%20and%20other%20infra structure.>

⁵⁷⁷ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard,” *foreignassistance.gov*, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2011/obligations/0>.

sector has generally risen over time, especially after 2018. Additionally, this increase in FMF when correlated with its importance as a foreign assistance activity and its relation to overall foreign assistance sectors, shows that the U.S. has become more willing to support the Philippines militarily over time. This greater support for its ally could be viewed both as reassurance to the Philippines of the United States' support, but also an attempt to balance against China in Southeast Asia.

DATA SOURCES FOR FIGURES 4.1-4.6

The data for figures 4.1-4.6 came from four types of sources: U.S. Government Documents/Databases, U.S. Government Agency press releases, scholarly sources, and media sources. The U.S. Government documents were mainly used to compile data on FONOPs for figures 4.1 and 4.2. They included Department of Defense reports, such as the DoD's Annual Report to Congress on the Freedom of Navigation Program,⁵⁷⁸ as well as Congressional Research Office reports.⁵⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the U.S. Foreign Assistance Database,⁵⁸⁰ managed by the State Department, contributed data to figure 4.6.

⁵⁷⁸ Available at: <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSSDP-Offices/FON/>.

⁵⁷⁹ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, R42784, February 5, 2024: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784>.

⁵⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country Dashboard," *foreignassistance.gov*, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/>.

U.S. government agency press releases were official statements by agencies like the Department of Defense,⁵⁸¹ branches of the U.S. Military like the Navy,⁵⁸² and specific sub-groups within larger government agencies such as Pacific Command⁵⁸³ and the U.S. Embassy in Manila.⁵⁸⁴ These press releases were used to find numbers of FONOPs for Figure 4.1 and amounts of U.S. forces involved in Exercise Balikatan and MTA Sama Sama for Figure 4.3-4.5.

Scholarly sources included scholarly articles and publications about U.S-China relations, U.S. Policy, and the South China Sea. These sources included data and analysis on bilateral exercises, such as pieces published by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative⁵⁸⁵ or the United States Naval Institute.⁵⁸⁶ They also contained numbers of FONOPs and the Chinese perspective on U.S. Policy and behavior in the SCS like the report “2022年美军南海军事行动不完全报告”

⁵⁸¹ For example: U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S., Philippines Strengthen Alliance With Maritime Training Activity Sama Sama,” *Department of Defense*, July 9, 2018.
<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1569455/us-philippines-strengthen-alliance-with-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/>.

⁵⁸² For example: Mohammed Issa, “Multilateral exercise Sama-Sama Lumbas 2022 concludes,” Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CPF), October 19, 2022.
<https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3193619/multilateral-exercise-sama-sama-lumbas-2022-concludes/#:~:text=Combined%20Philippine%20U.S.%20and%20Philippine,Philippines%20and%20the%20Sulu%20Sea.>

⁵⁸³ For example: Rebecca Moore, “US, Philippines Partner with Allies During Exercise Sama Sama 2023,” *U.S. Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)*, October 2, 2023.
<https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3545630/us-philippines-partner-with-allies-during-exercise-sama-sama-2023/>.

⁵⁸⁴ For example: U.S. Embassy in Manila, “U.S. AND PHILIPPINE FORCES SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDE 37TH BALIKATAN,” *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, April 8, 2022.
<https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-philippine-forces-successfully-conclude-37th-balikatan/>.

⁵⁸⁵ For example, Renato Cruz de Castro, “U.S.-PHILIPPINES BALIKATAN EXERCISE IN THE FACE OF CHINESE ISLAND BUILDING,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 17, 2015.
<https://amti.csis.org/u-s-philippines-balikatan-exercise-in-the-face-of-chinese-island-building/#:~:text=Balikatan%202015%20is%20the%2031,Philippine%20U.S.%20Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty.>

⁵⁸⁶ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “U.S. and Japan Prepare for Joint Exercise; U.S. Wraps up Drills with Allies in South China Sea,” *United States Naval Institute*, October 21, 2022.
<https://news.usni.org/2022/10/21/u-s-and-japan-prepare-for-joint-exercise-u-s-wraps-up-drills-with-allies-in-south-china-sea.>

(An Incomplete Report on US Military Activities in the South China Sea in 2022), published by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative.⁵⁸⁷ This data was used in figures 4.1 and 4.3-4.4. Finally they could also contain important background and context for data analysis, such as the Center for Strategic & International Studies piece on the U.S.-Philippine Alliance.⁵⁸⁸ This context was used in the analysis of figures 4.3-4.6.

Finally, media sources were used to gather quantitative data, assess the rhetoric surrounding FONOPs and bilateral exercises, and examine to what extent news sources were connecting these operational events with the South China Sea disputes. These sources included articles written by foreign news agencies, such as the Philippine News Agency⁵⁸⁹ and publications by mainstream U.S. media sources like CNN.⁵⁹⁰ I also looked at foreign policy focused news outlets like the Diplomat⁵⁹¹ and military focused media publications like DefenseNews.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁷ The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative is a Chinese source on scholarship, news, and policy analysis related to the South China Sea. It is officially unaffiliated, but largely run by scholars associated with Peking University, like Hu Bo. An English version of their report can be found here: (<http://www.scspi.fdu.org/en/yjbg/incomplete-report-us-military-activities-south-china-sea-2022>).

⁵⁸⁸ Gregory Poling, “The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

⁵⁸⁹ For example: Priam Nepomuceno, “Exercise Samasama' highlights PH, US troops' strong bond,” *Philippine News Agency*, October 2, 2023. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1210922>.

⁵⁹⁰ Brad Lendon, “US and Philippines launch military drills with partners as China tensions mount,” *CNN*, October 3, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/03/asia/us-philippines-naval-exercise-sama-sama-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

⁵⁹¹ For example: Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Does a Bigger 2018 Balikatan Military Exercise Say About US-Philippines Alliance under Duterte?” *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-does-a-bigger-2018-balikatan-military-exercise-say-about-us-philippines-alliance-under-duterte/#:~:text=Vidallon%2C%20the%20Balikatan%20Combined%20Joint,troops%20from%20the%20U.S.%20side>.

⁵⁹² For example: Leilani Chavez, “US, Philippines wrap up naval drill amid clashes in South China Sea,” *DefenseNews*, October 18, 2023. <https://www.defensenews.com/training-sim/2023/10/18/us-philippines-wrap-up-naval-drill-amid-clashes-in-south-china-sea/>.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: EVIDENCE FROM 20 YEARS OF U.S. POLICY REGARDING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Qualitative data for this study consists of evidence from U.S. policy documents regarding the South China Sea from 1995-September 2023 and information gathered from interviews with subject matter experts on U.S-China relations and U.S. policy regarding the SCS. I first summarize the seven U.S. policy documents that governed U.S. policy towards the South China Sea from 2000 to September 2023. Then I discuss important trends, changes, and patterns in these policies. Finally, I explain my methods for interviewing subject matter experts and how these interviews were used in this study.

THE HISTORY OF U.S. POLICY REGARDING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IN SEVEN DOCUMENTS

U.S. Policy towards the South China Sea is codified in seven policy documents, composed mainly of declaratory policy issued through official U.S. statements at press briefings, speeches by high-ranking U.S. officials, and State Department “Limits in the Seas” studies, which are legal studies of Chinese claims in the South China Sea. These documents are listed below in table 4.1 in descending chronological order. The first of these documents was issued prior to the start date for this study, but is included because it governed U.S. behavior in the South China Sea for the entirety of the Nascent Period (2000-2008). Document two was issued during the “Pivot” Period (2009-2012), and the remaining five documents were all issued within the Transformative Period (2013-September 2023)

Table 4.1: Defining Documents in the United States’ South China Sea Policy

1. 1995 US State Department Daily Press Briefing Statement on the South China Sea ⁵⁹³
2. 2010: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Remarks at a Press Availability in Vietnam ⁵⁹⁴
3. 2014: The Department of State’s “Limits in the Seas” Study “China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea.” ⁵⁹⁵
4. 2015: Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s Keynote address at the Shangri-la Dialogue ⁵⁹⁶
5. 2019: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability ⁵⁹⁷
6. 2020: The U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea ⁵⁹⁸
7. 2022: The Department of State’s Study “Limits in the Seas” “People’s Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea” ⁵⁹⁹
Source: Author

The US State Department Daily Press Briefing Statement on the South China Sea (1995)

As discussed in Chapter 3, the United States remained neutral regarding the South China Sea disputes for most of its history, and largely had no specific policy regarding this geographic area. The first time the U.S. openly issued an official policy on the South China Sea was in 1995, when the U.S. State Department issued a Daily Press Briefing Statement in May 1995. This

⁵⁹³ Full version of the statement available on page 1 of Michael McDevitt, “The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future,” Washington D.C: CNA Analysis and Solutions, 2014.
<https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf>,

⁵⁹⁴ Full version of Secretary Clinton’s remarks available at:
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

⁵⁹⁵ Full study is available here: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LIS-143.pdf>.

⁵⁹⁶ Full version of Secretary Carter’s keynote address available at:
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-defense-secretary-gives-keynote-address-at-shangri-la-dialogue/2800510.html>.

⁵⁹⁷ Full transcript of Secretary Pompeo’s remarks can be found at:
<https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>.

⁵⁹⁸ Full text of the U.S. position available at:
<https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁵⁹⁹ Full study available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>.

statement was issued in response to the PRC seizing Mischief Reef earlier that year,⁶⁰⁰ an event which likely sparked U.S. concerns about the increasing tension between claimants in the SCS and the lengths they might go to in order to assert their claims.⁶⁰¹

This statement laid out the basis for U.S. policy in the SCS and its main points are that the U.S. “strongly opposes” the use or threat of force to resolve competing claims, has an “abiding interest” in maintaining peace and stability in the SCS, has a “fundamental interest” in maintaining freedom of navigation, and takes no official position on the legality of the various disputes and sovereignty claims in the SCS. Additionally, the statement declared that (1) “The United States is concerned that a pattern of unilateral actions and reactions in the South China Sea has increased tensions in the region;” (2) “The United States reaffirms its welcome of the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea;”⁶⁰² and (3) the U.S would “view with serious concern any maritime claim or restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that was not consistent with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”⁶⁰³ Through this short statement, the U.S. established its fundamental interests in the South China Sea: no use of force, peace and stability, freedom of navigation, neutrality, and the importance of international law.

⁶⁰⁰ Stanley E. Meyer, “The Incident at Mischief Reef: Implications for the Philippines, China, and the United States,” *Strategic Research Paper*, U.S. Army War College, Pennsylvania: Jan 6 1996.

⁶⁰¹ This supposition is supported by the statement itself, which declares that: “The United States is concerned that a pattern of unilateral actions and reactions in the South China Sea has increased tensions in the region.” U.S. State Department, “Daily Press Briefing, May 10, 1995,” *Press Statement*, May 10, 1995 in Michael McDevitt, “The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future,” Washington D.C: CNA Analysis and Solutions, 2014. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf>, 1.

⁶⁰² This document was signed by the ASEAN foreign ministers during the 25th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Manila, the Philippines in 1992. The Declaration called for a peaceful resolution of disputes, the exercise of restraint by involved parties, and cooperation in areas of mutual interest. It was the precursor to the 2000 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, signed by ASEAN and China in 2002. For more information, see: <https://www.nbr.org/publication/asean/>.

⁶⁰³ U.S. State Department, “Daily Press Briefing, May 10, 1995,” *Press Statement*, May 10, 1995 in Michael McDevitt, “The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future,” Washington D.C: CNA Analysis and Solutions, 2014. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf>, 1.

However, this statement is more of a declaration of interest and recognition than a policy directive meant to address the problems in the South China Sea. It contains no explicit threats or demands and the language itself is tepid. Words like “concerned”, “opposes,” and “reaffirms” do not convey a commitment to back up this declaration with force. There is only an echo of implicit threat that the United States might do something if a claimant country attempts to impede freedom of navigation or uses force to assert its claims.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Remarks at a Press Availability in Vietnam (2010)

Secretary Clinton’s statement at a press availability in Vietnam in 2010 was another watershed moment regarding the United States’ policy towards the South China Sea. These remarks were made in the wake of a resurgence in tension over the SCS as a result of the claim submissions process for extended continental shelves under UNCLOS, and China’s first international assertion of the legitimacy of the nine-dash line in 2009. In this speech Secretary Clinton said, “The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea.”⁶⁰⁴ She also rearticulated the interests laid out in the 1995 DoS Statement, and emphasized the importance of settling these disputes according to the precepts of UNCLOS and international law. She then declared that the U.S. supports SCS claimants’ efforts to create a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, and that the U.S. was willing to be involved in “confidence building measures” to help resolve the disputes.

Her remarks during this press conference have been interpreted by several scholars as being the first to openly declare that the United States is interested and concerned about the

⁶⁰⁴ Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at Press Availability,” Press Conference at National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010.
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

South China Sea.⁶⁰⁵ Additionally, her statement marks the first time the U.S. stated it was willing to become involved in the disputes, if only as an arbiter. Finally, this speech was the first time the U.S. emphasized its support for ASEAN in the context of the SCS, and their shared interests in freedom of navigation and international law. In the words of Secretary Clinton,

The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. We share these interests not only with ASEAN members or ASEAN Regional Forum participants, but with other maritime nations and the broader international community.⁶⁰⁶

This statement makes clear that the U.S. is more aligned with the Southeast Asian claimants in the SCS, and opposes China's interpretation of UNCLOS and international law.⁶⁰⁷

"Limits in the Seas" Study No. 143 "China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea (2014)

The Department of State's 2014 "Limits in the Seas" study on China's maritime claims is a legal study that lays out the United States' official stance on China's maritime claims in the South China Sea as they relate to the nine-dash line.⁶⁰⁸ This report could be a reaction to two larger geopolitical events. First, the U.S. could have released this legal study to support the

⁶⁰⁵ Jian Yang, "Navigating the Volatile South China Sea," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 5 (2011): 2–6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45236133>; Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2018), 179; Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 9.

⁶⁰⁶ Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at Press Availability," Press Conference at National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

⁶⁰⁷ As discussed in chapter 3, China believes that UNCLOS allows a coastal state to require vessels passing through its territorial sea to obtain prior notification, a practice that impedes freedom of navigation. China has similar interpretations for aircraft flying through its airspace or ADIZ. China also believes that a state can enjoy historic rights of sovereignty over maritime and land features under UNCLOS.

⁶⁰⁸ As discussed in chapter 3, the nine-dash line is a line made up of nine segments off the Chinese coast in the South China Sea. The Chinese government calls it a "traditional maritime boundary line" and appears mainly on Chinese and Taiwanese maps. The nine-dash line is used to claim sovereignty over features in the South China Sea.

Philippines during the South China Sea Arbitration. Second, it has been tied to Chinese reclamation and island building efforts in the South China Sea.⁶⁰⁹

The main argument of this study is that China has failed to clarify its maritime claims associated with the nine-dash line “in a manner consistent with international law.”⁶¹⁰ As a result, there are three possible interpretations of the nine-dash based on Chinese laws, declarations, and acts, but all of them are non-compliant with UNCLOS. First, the nine dash line represents a line within which China claims sovereignty over all features and water, and sovereignty over the UNCLOS maritime zones generated by those features. Second, it represents a national boundary line. Third, it represents the limits of “so-called historic maritime claims of varying types.”⁶¹¹

This study represents the official stance of the U.S. government regarding China’s maritime claims through the nine-dash line and breaks with the 1995 Statement’s policy of neutrality regarding the legality of various SCS claims. Through this statement, the U.S. declared that it views the nine-dash line as illegitimate, and therefore China’s claims to much of the South China Sea as invalid. It is also notable that the U.S. also assessed the legality of the Philippines’ “archipelagic and other maritime claims and boundaries” in 2014 and found them largely

⁶⁰⁹ Mingjiang Li and Archana Atmakuri, “US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea*, ed. Keyuan Zou (New York: Routledge, 2021), 459-460. As discussed in chapter 3, the Philippines initiated the South China Sea arbitration in 2013, the same year China began building islands on disputed SCS features under its *de jure* possession.

⁶¹⁰ Kevin Baumert and Brian Melchior, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 143: CHINA MARITIME CLAIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, December 5, 2014. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LIS-143.pdf>, 23

⁶¹¹ Kevin Baumert and Brian Melchior, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 143: CHINA MARITIME CLAIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, December 5, 2014. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LIS-143.pdf>, 23-24.

compliant with UNCLOS.⁶¹² This study aimed at the Philippines was also likely conducted to support the Philippine position in the South China Sea Arbitration.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's Keynote address at the Shangri-la Dialogue (2015)

In 2015 Defense Secretary Ashton Carter delivered the keynote address at the Shangri-la Dialogue.⁶¹³ This address directly responded to China's island building campaign in the South China Sea. During this speech, Secretary Carter repeated the United States' commitments from the 1995 statement, and restated Secretary Clinton's support for regional institutions like ASEAN. However, his speech signals a key change in U.S. policy in three key areas. First, he directly addressed the issue of Chinese behavior in the SCS for the first time, and highlighted the need to foster the PRC's "peaceful rise in a manner that promoted economic growth and regional stability." In essence, this statement was attempting to bring general U.S. policy regarding China into South China Sea policy for the first time. From a U.S. policy standpoint, this statement also sets China up as the main antagonist of the South China Sea disputes.

Second, he stated the importance of "an international order based on compliance with international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes without the threat of force." Although this statement sounds like previous references to international law, the use of the term "international order" is new and would become a mainstay for U.S. statements regarding the South China Sea and calls for China to follow the "Liberal rules-based order." This statement

⁶¹² Brian Melchior and Kevin Baumert, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 142: PHILIPPINES ARCHIPELAGIC AND OTHER MARITIME CLAIMS AND BOUNDARIES*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, September 15, 2014. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LIS-142.pdf>.

⁶¹³ The Shangri-La Dialogue is an annual international defense summit in Singapore, and is considered one of Asia's premier defense summits. It "enables decision-makers from across the Asia-Pacific, North America, Europe and the Middle East to gather together to discuss the most pressing regional security issues and to share policy responses. It features plenary debates led by government ministers, as well as important opportunities for bilateral discussions among delegations." More information on the Dialogue can be found here: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/iiss-shangri-la-dialogue/>.

makes clear that the U.S. considers the SCS an area where the Liberal World Order is under threat, and therefore an area of concern.

Finally, Secretary Carter brought the importance of alliances in the United States' South China Sea policy. He stated that it was important for the U.S. to honor its alliances and security commitments, and retain “the full confidence of our partners in the region,” showing the world that the U.S. was adding allies to its core interests in the South China Sea.⁶¹⁴

Additionally, Secretary Carter made a statement that has become one of the most important and repeated U.S. phrases regarding the South China Sea.⁶¹⁵ At the Shangri-la Dialogue Secretary Carter declared that:

There should be no mistake: **the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows**, as U.S. forces do all over the world. America, alongside its allies and partners in the regional architecture, will not be deterred from exercising these rights, the rights of all nations. After all, turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit.⁶¹⁶

Admiral McDevitt highlights this statement as representing a turn towards “a much more military buttressed policy approach to China’s activities in the South China Sea,” and a signal from the U.S. that it was not going to be pushed out of Asia.⁶¹⁷ Additionally, the tone of this statement makes it clear that the U.S. is taking much more interest in the SCS and a much firmer stance against Chinese activities in the region. Secretary Carter firmly declares that China’s

⁶¹⁴ Ashton Carter, “US Defense Secretary Gives Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue,” Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2015.
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-defense-secretary-gives-keynote-address-at-shangrila-dialogue/2800510.html>.

⁶¹⁵ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024. Transcript available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14W07IcJDAR0YFigaGX-itExfzHFB4Uen/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100499727363606636194&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

⁶¹⁶ Ashton Carter, “US Defense Secretary Gives Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue,” Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2015.
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-defense-secretary-gives-keynote-address-at-shangrila-dialogue/2800510.html> ; The bolded text is the most repeated line from this overall statement.

⁶¹⁷ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

recent activities in the South China Sea are excessive and illegal under UNCLOS, and that the United States will support its allies and oppose China in the South China Sea.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary (2019)

During press remarks with the Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. in 2019, Secretary Pompeo finally clarified that the United States-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty applies to Philippine forces and materials in the South China Sea. Secretary Pompeo declared:

The Philippines depends on free and unobstructed access to the seas. China's island-building and military activities in the South China Sea threaten your sovereignty, security, and therefore economic livelihood, as well as that of the United States. As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.⁶¹⁸

As discussed in chapter 3, the Philippines had sought this reassurance since the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-Off, so it is important to consider the timing of this clarification. The U.S. probably made this commitment in 2019 for three reasons. The first reason was to repair U.S.-Philippines relations after President Duterte's failed attempts at rapprochement with China. Second, Admiral McDevitt explains that the U.S. gambled that “the possibility of direct U.S. military involvement [was] the best way to deter China's use of force against any of the Philippine garrisons in the Spratlys.”⁶¹⁹ Finally, Admiral McDevitt also argues that the U.S. hoped that providing this clarification would prompt the Philippines to give U.S. forces access to Philippine military facilities on Luzon through the EDCA. The U.S. would want access to these facilities on Luzon “because of its proximity to Taiwan and the sea lanes through the SCS.”⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁸ Michael Pompeo, “Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability,” Press Remarks, Manila, Philippines, March 1, 2019. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>.

⁶¹⁹ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁶²⁰ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

Although this statement is short, it is important because it raised the risk of U.S-China confrontation in the South China Sea and drew a redline for China. First, this statement is clearly meant to deter China from seizing any Philippine held territory in the SCS, as the U.S. is now bound to respond, both by treaty. Second, it placed reputational costs on potential U.S. intervention in the SCS, raising the risk that the U.S. might have to intervene in a Sino-Philippine conflict in the SCS. If China attacks Philippine military personnel or facilities in the SCS and the U.S. refuses to intervene to uphold its MDT obligations, then this refusal would hurt U.S. credibility as an ally.

Finally, this statement also indicates a much more competitive turn in U.S policy towards the South China Sea. The statement's tone is firm, hawkish, and confrontational. Secretary Pompeo positioned China as a threat to the Philippines, and by extension to the United States. He clearly makes China the enemy. This tone and positioning is also evidence of how U.S-China competition became the overarching framework for U.S. perception of the South China Sea.

The U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea (2020)

Following the extension of the MDT to the South China Sea, Secretary Pompeo made a press statement in 2020 declaring the U.S. position on maritime claims in the South China Sea. Despite the name, this statement was really about the validity of China's claims in the SCS. This statement is especially notable because it officially broke with the 1995 statement's declaration that the U.S. is neutral regarding the legality of the SCS claimants territorial and maritime claims. Additionally, this is the first U.S. policy document that does not appear to have been issued in direct response to an external occurrence or action in the South China Sea.

Secretary Pompeo could have made this clarification in response to China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS in 2020, continued U.S. concerns over China's artificial islands, and U.S. fears that China would declare an ADIZ over the South China Sea.⁶²¹ However, no source explicitly draws the connection between these events in the SCS and this policy document.

The 2020 statement reasserts the United States' interests expressed in the 1995 statement, emphasizes the importance of allies and partners in the region, and highlights the United States' interest in maintaining a "rules-based international order" in the South China Sea. However, it breaks from previous U.S. policy by stating that the U.S. is unequivocally aligning its position on the SCS disputes with the ruling of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration. Therefore, the United States' official stance on China's SCS claims is: (1) the PRC "cannot lawfully assert a maritime claim derived from features in the Philippines EEZ," such as Second Thomas Shoal; (2) the U.S. "rejects any PRC claim to waters beyond a 12-nautical mile territorial sea derived from islands it claims in the Spratly Islands;" (3) the U.S. declares that "any PRC action to harass other states' fishing or hydrocarbon development in these waters – or to carry out such activities unilaterally – is unlawful"; And (4) "the PRC has no lawful territorial or maritime claim to (or derived from) James Shoal, an entirely submerged feature."⁶²²

This statement is much firmer than previous statements regarding the legality of China's SCS claims, and makes clear that the United States opposes China's claims and considers them illegitimate under UNCLOS. It also connects this stance with U.S. allies and the "rules based international order," signaling that it is not just the U.S. opposing China's claims and behavior in the SCS, but a whole coalition of states represented by the U.S. Additionally, it is interesting to

⁶²¹ European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, *At Glance: China tightens its grip over the South China Sea*, by Gisela Grieger, PE 689.338, 2021.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/689338/EPRS_ATA\(2021\)689338_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/689338/EPRS_ATA(2021)689338_EN.pdf).

⁶²² Michael Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," Press Statement, July 13, 2020.
<https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

note that this statement appears to be the first time the U.S. made a proactive change to its SCS policy. This statement was likely prompted by China's behavior in the SCS during the 2010s, especially its island building campaign in the Spratlys from 2013-2015. This campaign has led to continual fears from the U.S. and its allies that China could build more bases in the future, especially on Scarborough Shoal.⁶²³ However, since previous U.S. policy decisions were often directly catalyzed by external forces, it is important to note this potential shift in U.S. behavior from reactivity to proactivity.

"Limits in the Seas" Study No. 150 "People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea (2022)

In 2022 the State Department published a second "Limits in the Seas" study on China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. In contrast to the 2014 study, the 2022 study examined all China's maritime claims in the SCS.⁶²⁴ This study could have been released for four reasons. The first is the U.S. wanted to respond to China's 2021 Coast Guard Law: "中华人民共和国海警法" (Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China). In particular, the U.S. could have been responding article 22, which states that:

国家主权、主权权利和管辖权在海上正在受到外国组织和个人的不法侵害或者面临不法侵害的紧迫危险时，海警机构有权依照本法和其他相关法律、法规，采取包括使用武器在内的一切必要措施制止侵害、排除危险。(When the national sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction is illegally violated at sea by a foreign organization or individual, or there is an imminent danger of an illegal violation, the coast guard shall have the power to take all necessary measures, including the use of weapons, to stop the violation and eliminate the danger according to this Law and other applicable laws and regulations).⁶²⁵

⁶²³ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225.

⁶²⁴ Full study available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>.

⁶²⁵ Full text of the law available here: <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%8D%8E%E4%BA%BA%E6%B0%91%E5%85%B1%E5%92%8C%E5%9B%BD%E6%B5%B7%E8%AD%A6%E6%B3%95>. Translation edited by author and reviewed by

Other states found this article concerning because of the unclear meaning of 管辖权 (*guǎnxiá quán*, jurisdiction) in the context of the South China Sea, and the law's provision that the Chinese Coast Guard could use weapons against foreign vessels.⁶²⁶ This sort of opportunity for violence raised the risk of a kinetic incident breaking out between the Chinese Coast Guard and other foreign vessels in the area, even those belonging to the United States.

Second, this 2022 study could have been issued in response to China sending hundreds of ships to Whitsun Reef⁶²⁷ in the Philippines' EEZ in 2021 in a clear violation of UNCLOS.⁶²⁸ Third, this study could also have been meant to preempt any declaration of Chinese straight baselines around the Spratly Islands. Fourth, the study could have been released to give further legal backing to the U.S. alignment of its stance on the SCS disputes with the 2016 SCS Arbitration ruling.

The main point of this 2022 State Department Study is that PRC claims are overall noncompliant with UNCLOS. The study declares that PRC claims made since the previous study in 2014 and the 2016 SCS arbitration are more expansive and clearly noncompliant with international law.⁶²⁹ Additionally, the study argues that the maritime features China turned into islands are not legally islands under UNCLOS. The study also demonstrates that the PRC's use of straight baselines is noncompliant with UNCLOS and that its "asserted intention to establish

Professor Wang Yang. Source of original English translation can be found here:
<https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=34610>.

⁶²⁶ European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, *At Glance: China tightens its grip over the South China Sea*, by Gisela Grieger, PE 689.338, 2021.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/689338/EPRS_ATA\(2021\)689338_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/689338/EPRS_ATA(2021)689338_EN.pdf)

⁶²⁷ Although Whitsun reef is in the Philippines EEZ, China claims it since it lies within the nine-dash line.

⁶²⁸ Samir Puri and Greg Austin, "What the Whitsun Reef incident tells us about China's future operations at sea," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, April 9, 2021.
<https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/04/whitsun-reef-incident-china/>.

⁶²⁹ Kevin Baumert, Amy Stern, and Amanda Williams, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 150: People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, January 2022. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>, 29.

baselines around other “island groups” in the South China Sea are also inconsistent with international law.”⁶³⁰ This finding in particular shows that the U.S. is concerned about China declaring a straight baseline around the Spratlys. Finally, the study declares China cannot legally use South China Sea island groups “as a whole or “historic rights” to assert maritime sovereignty over the South China Sea.”⁶³¹

This 2022 study is far more expensive than the 2014 assessment of the nine-dash line, and demonstrates a clear escalation in the United States’ interest in the region and willingness to stand up to China in the SCS. Additionally, this study is an example of a combination of U.S. proactivity and reactivity regarding the South China Sea. The U.S. could have issued this study in response to China’s 2021 Coast Guard Law. For example, since the study shows that China’s SCS claims are largely illegitimate under UNCLOS, the jurisdiction under which this law could operate is limited to China’s twelve nautical mile territorial waters. Additionally, the U.S. could have issued the report in response to large-scale Chinese infringement of the Philippines’ EEZ. However, the issue of baselines in the Spratlys show that this declaration was also an attempt to proactively counter China’s perceived intentions in the South China Sea.

Important Trends

Although these seven documents address different areas of U.S. policy, examining them all chronologically demonstrates three important trends in U.S. policy from 2000 through September 2023. The first trend is the growing importance of allies in U.S. policy towards the South China Sea. Allies were not originally a priority for the United States in 1995, but

⁶³⁰ Kevin Baumert, Amy Stern, and Amanda Williams, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 150: People’s Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, January 2022. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>, 29.

⁶³¹ Kevin Baumert, Amy Stern, and Amanda Williams, *LIMITS IN THE SEAS No. 150: People’s Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*, Washington D.C: Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs of the State Department, January 2022. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LIS150-SCS.pdf>.

beginning with Secretary Clinton's 2010 speech, allies started becoming a more central focus. They became a defining factor after Secretary Carter's 2014 speech, where they were named as a vital interest. This role is seen in how the U.S.-Philippines alliance ensured the U.S. could intervene in a SCS conflict involving the Philippines because of the MDT. Clearly, after 2014 allies became a driving motivation and tool for U.S. policy in the South China Sea, both increasing the risk of possible U.S. involvement in a conflict in the South China Sea and an expansion of U.S. activity in the region through its alliances and on behalf of its allies.

Second, the rate at which the U.S. amended its South China Sea policy increased over time. The United States' SCS policy was governed by only one policy from 2000 to 2010, and that was the 1995 State Department Statement. However, from 2010-2022 the U.S. changed its South China Sea policy four times, in 2010, 2014, 2019, and 2020. This increase in policy changes over time indicates that the United States became more interested and involved in the South China Sea after 2010. This change in the rate of policy changes could also indicate that the United States will be much more responsive and engaged with disputes and problems in the South China Sea moving forward.

Third, the United States changed from reactively formulating its SCS policy to proactively issuing its policy. From 1995-2019, most of the United States' stances regarding the South China Sea were issued in reaction to an outside event in the region, such as the PRC seizing territory or the Philippines needing support or reassurance. However, beginning with Secretary Pompeo's statement aligning the United States' stance on China's maritime claims in the SCS with the 2016 arbitration, the U.S. seemed to be proactively making policy to counter potential Chinese actions in the SCS. This trend holds important implications for how policy formulation for peripheral areas changes during shifts in the global world order.

All three of these trends, the growing importance of allies in the South China Sea, increase in the rate of policy change, and movement from reactive to proactive policies, seem to indicate the South China Sea became more of a U.S. priority from 2000 to 2023. Additionally, although this study does not specifically focus on how speeches made by high-level U.S. officials changed over time, it is interesting that the majority of the important U.S. speeches regarding the South China Sea occur after 2012. These speeches and statements overlap somewhat with the policy documents examined in this section and are listed chronologically and by period in table 4.2. I call these speeches notable because they were repeatedly referenced in scholarly works or in interviews with subject matter experts.⁶³² The increase in speeches restating and reaffirming U.S. interests, policy, and commitments in the SCS over the course of my time period supports my hypothesis that the South China Sea became increasingly important to the U.S. over the time period covered by this study.

⁶³² For example, Hillary Clinton's 2010 speech was referenced by Jian Yang in "Navigating the Volatile South China Sea," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 5 (2011): 2–6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45236133> and by Gregory B. Poling in *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 9. Meanwhile, Admiral Michael McDevitt highlighted the importance of Defense Secretary Carter's 2015 Keynote Address and Secretary Blinken's 2021 Press Statement in an interview with the author.

Table 4.2: A Sample of Notable Speeches by High-Level U.S. Policymakers About the South China Sea

Period 1: 2000-2008	None ⁶³³
Period 2: 2009-2012	1. 2010: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Remarks at Press Availability in Vietnam ⁶³⁴
Period 3: 2012-September 2023	2. 2014: Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s Keynote address at the Shangri-la Dialogue ⁶³⁵ 3. 2020: Assistant-Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stillwell’s speech “The South China Sea, Southeast Asia’s Patrimony, and Everybody’s Own Backyard” ⁶³⁶ 4. 2021: Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s Press Statement “Fifth Anniversary of the Arbitral Tribunal Ruling on the South China Sea.” ⁶³⁷

Source: Author

INTERVIEWS WITH SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS: METHODS AND USES

As part of this study, I conducted interviews with subject matter experts to better understand U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea, U.S-China relations, U.S. approaches to the problem of China in the SCS, and predictions for how U.S. policy should proceed in the

⁶³³ A search through the State Department digital archives, CNN digital archives, and New York Times digital archives only revealed two instances where high-level cabinet officials mentioned the South China Sea. 1. Donald Rumsfeld implicitly referenced the SCS when discussing the EP3 Incident and continuing surveillance flights in 2001. (See: <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0104/13/se.02.html>). 2. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006, where she briefly mentioned the South China Sea as an issue between Japan and China. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/26/washington/26rice-transcript.html>). This lack of attention is likely due to the Bush Administration’s preoccupation with the global War on Terror and Wars in the Middle East, which Dr. Paul Smith argued derailed any intentions the U.S. had of making China-related issues a foreign policy priority. (Interview with Author).

⁶³⁴ Full version of Secretary Clinton’s remarks available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

⁶³⁵ Full version of Secretary Carter’s keynote address available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-defense-secretary-gives-keynote-address-at-shangrila-dialogue/2800510.html>.

⁶³⁶ Full version of Assistant Secretary Stillwell’s Speech available here: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-south-china-sea-southeast-asias-patrimony-and-everybodys-own-backyard/>.

⁶³⁷ Full version of Secretary Blinken’s Speech available here: <https://www.state.gov/fifth-anniversary-of-the-arbitral-tribunal-ruling-on-the-south-china-sea/>.

future. Overall I conducted eleven interviews via phone, zoom and email, which on average lasted from forty five minutes to an hour. Every interview was recorded and transcribed into a transcript, which was then sent to participants for approval before inclusion in this thesis. For lists of interview questions, see Appendix 3.

Interviewees can be grouped into four broad categories: former-policymakers, military experts, U.S-China relations-focused scholars, and China focused scholars. Former-policymakers included Ambassador Chas Freeman, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia, and former Director of the American Institute in Taiwan Douglas Paal. Military Experts include Retired Admiral Michael McDevitt and Dr. James Holmes. U.S-China focused scholars include Dr. Paul Heer, Dr. Paul Smith, and Dr. Michael Swaine. Finally China-focused experts include Professor Ryan Martinson, Mr. Conor Kennedy, and Director Christopher Sharman.

I used the information gathered from these interviews in three key ways. First, as valuable sources and commentary for chapter 3. Second, as evidence for my own analysis of historical events in chapter 3 and examination of the data in this chapter. Their analysis was often used to both contextualize and enhance my findings in both the quantitative and qualitative sections of this empirical chapter. Finally, I used the opinions and analysis from these interviews as evidence when testing IR theories in my fifth chapter.

IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS

The overall trends in my data from my quantitative analysis and evidence from my qualitative analysis hold three important implications for how U.S. policy towards China

changed in peripheral areas from 2000 to 2023. These trends also help explain how a hegemon will behave towards a rising power in peripheral areas during shifts in the global world order. First, it is clear that the United States changed from being a reactive actor in the case of the South China Sea to a proactive actor. This shift from reactive to proactive was accompanied by a shift from broad policies to specific policies. The U.S. began by issuing broad policies about the South China Sea, which did not mention any actor by name, in response to various events occurring in the region. However, after 2010 U.S. policy became increasingly firm and specific, with the U.S. declaring its support for actors like the Philippines and ASEAN, and opposing China. The policy then took on an increasingly confrontational tone after 2016, and the U.S. began preemptively issuing policy for the SCS starting in 2019. These changes in U.S. policy were likely prompted by changes in Chinese behavior that led the U.S. to perceive it as an increasing threat to U.S. interests and the Liberal World Order over this period.

Professor Martinson explained in an interview that although China did not like the United States' dominant presence in East Asia, they lacked the capabilities to push back against this unwanted presence in the early 2000s.⁶³⁸ However, once the PRC improved its capabilities, Conor Kennedy argues it “gradually and unilaterally altered the status quo by expanding its presence in the South China Sea.” China began to portray the U.S. as “a hostile aggressive power encroaching on its territory and maritime space,” which prompted it to significantly expand its presence in the South China Sea and upturn the military balance in the region.⁶³⁹ Both Mr. Conor Kennedy and Director Christopher Sharman argue that Chinese behavior militarized the South China Sea, which inherently puts it at odds with the U.S. and its allies, who sought to

⁶³⁸ Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024.

⁶³⁹ Conor Kennedy, email message to author, March 22, 2024. Transcript available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qNvoLodpmK_Y1VJ_AhNJcCwfl6Eu00r_dHDUbjkXxE0/edit?usp=sharing.

bolster the role of the international maritime order and UNCLOS in the South China Sea.⁶⁴⁰

Therefore, this trend indicates that hegemons are fundamentally complacent actors who will mainly be reactive actors in peripheral areas until perceived escalation in threatening behavior from the rising power forces the hegemon to become more proactive to preserve the world order

Second, the U.S. increasingly included allies in its South China Sea policy over this period and made greater attempts to internationalize the problems in the SCS. This trend is shown in its stated policy and its operational policy, as seen in the increasing amount of FMF given to the Philippines, U.S. forces involved in Balikatan, and in the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama. This trend demonstrates how the U.S. attempted to balance against China in peripheral areas starting in 2010, both through its local ally and through an international coalition. Expanded to my larger hegemonic framework, this finding means that hegemons will attempt to balance against rising powers in peripheral areas in order to shore up the global world order. This balancing can mean enhancing the capabilities of local powers, or bringing in more powerful actors from other regions to contain the threat of the rising power.

Finally, both my qualitative and quantitative markers reveal that the United States became more interested and involved in the South China Sea over time. It began by declaring neutrality and remaining aloof from the disputes, but then gradually adopted a willingness to intervene to help settle the conflicts peacefully, before finally taking increasingly firm stances on how the disputes should be handled and which states were in the wrong. This trend suggests that the U.S. had become increasingly involved in this peripheral area of the South China Sea as U.S.-China competition intensified. This involvement fundamentally changed the “peripheral” status of the South China Sea, at least in terms of U.S-China relations, and raises the question of

⁶⁴⁰ Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), April 2, 2024. Transcript Available here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BpK_7WlJuHk-5ovEXU7SUo-7tV8Kx6QedBOIz3aRSoc/edit?usp=sharing; Conor Kennedy, email message to author, March 22, 2024.

whether the SCS was even a truly peripheral issue, especially during the 2020s. Based on the data in this study, it appears the South China Sea became a more vital area of interest for the United States over time, even if it was still a lower priority than areas like Taiwan. In terms of hegemonic behavior, this finding indicates that during shifts in the global world order, competition with the rising power changes how the hegemon perceives peripheral areas, leading the hegemon to become increasingly interested and involved in peripheral areas as they relate to the rising power. This trend ultimately indicates that great power conflict will lead the hegemon to increasingly view proximal peripheral issues as vital if they become arenas for interstate competition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the qualitative and quantitative analysis in this chapter revealed three important trends: The United States changed from being a reactive actor to a proactive actor in the South China Sea, increasingly internationalized the SCS disputes and prioritized its allies in its policy, and over all became more interested and involved in the SCS over time. Additionally, my examination of data on U.S. FONOPs and bilateral exercises in the South China Sea revealed a hardening in U.S. attitude against China and China's maritime claim in the SCS. This data also implied shifts in U.S. media interest in the South China Sea. U.S. media agencies began to pay more attention to FONOPs in the South China Sea after 2015. This trend is another indicator of how the South China Sea rose in prominence from 2000 to 2023.

However, these changes in U.S. policy over time raise questions about how to theoretically explain U.S. policy in the South China Sea. The United States not only changed its

policy, but its attitude, its motivations, and the rate at which it issued that policy. Given all these shifts and the overarching influence of U.S-China relations on U.S. policy, it is unclear if one theory can explain these shifts in U.S. policy, behavior, and attitudes over time. The following chapter seeks to answer these questions and provide scholars with a framework for how to examine and analyze change in hegemonic behavior during times of instability in the global order by testing existing theories to determine their explanatory and analytical power.

CHAPTER 5

THEORY TESTING AND A FRAMEWORK FOR HEGEMONIC BEHAVIOR IN PERIPHERAL AREAS

On the US side, you just see us being increasingly more active and having a defense posture and orientation in the South China Sea. That seems to be what our end state is.

—Chad Sbragia, interview with author

In this chapter, I examine the predictions of offensive realism, structural liberalism, hegemonic order theory, and brinkmanship to test their explanatory power for U.S. policy and behavior regarding the South China Sea from 2000 to 2023. I generate counterfactual policy predictions based on these existing theories and then apply them to each of my three periods, the Nascent Period (2000-2008), the “Pivot Period” (2009-2012), and the Transformative Period (2013-September 2023), to test if they explain U.S. policy during those years. After completing these assessments, I make a determination regarding the applicability of that theory for my case of the South China Sea and my broader questions regarding U.S.-China relations and hegemonic behavior during times of shifts in the global world order.

Table 5.1 visually represents how this testing will proceed. In this table, the four theories are listed vertically, with hegemonic order theory broken into its two major mechanisms of hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory. The three time periods are listed horizontally from left to right, with a final column representing the theory’s overall applicability during my entire timeframe. As I assess each theory, I will mark in the table whether it explains U.S. policy during that period, and whether it is applicable to my overall time frame. After each theory has been tested, the final version of the table will represent when each theory was

applicable, and present guidelines for how these theories should be used together to analyze hegemonic behavior during shifts in the global world order.

Table 5.1: Model of Testing Table

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism				
Structural Liberalism				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ○=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Ultimately this testing resulted in four important findings. First, the theories with the greatest explanatory power changed over the course of my time period as the United States shifted its policy. At the beginning, structural liberalism had the most accurate predictions and best explanatory power, however during my third period the power transition theory aspect of hegemonic order theory and brinkmanship best explained U.S. policy. This trend indicates that U.S. policy in peripheral areas like the South China Sea should be analyzed using a framework that accounts for change over time and employs a combination of structural liberalism, hegemonic order theory, and brinkmanship. Second, this testing shows that hegemonic stability theory has very strong explanatory power for hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas. Hegemonic stability theory is usually employed to examine international relations as a whole and explain a hegemon's overall influence on international politics. However, this finding indicates

that HST can be applied in more specific cases of interstate relations as well. Third, this study highlights the need to examine a state's foreign policy over time and as the product of many individual policies, as opposed to examining it as one single long policy, especially in peripheral areas. Fourth, this testing reveals a framework that incorporates a long time frame and a sequence of theories for how scholars should approach studying hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas during shifts in the global order.

TEST 1: OFFENSIVE REALISM

Offensive realism is a specific subvariant of realism that uses the broader dynamics of neorealism to create a framework for how a hegemon will respond to structural changes in international relations. The version of offensive realism used in this study is described in John Mearsheimer's work *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and further developed by Christopher Layne in "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon." According to offensive realism, because states live in an insecure world, but want to maximize their power and security, they are compelled to break out of this "security dilemma" by becoming a hegemon.⁶⁴¹ Additionally, since this insecurity will drive great powers to have a zero-sum mentality when dealing with each other, the hegemon will think offensively in terms of maximizing its relative power and ensuring its survival, leading it to have aggressive intentions towards rivals.⁶⁴² Therefore, once a state becomes a hegemon, it will actively seek to prevent the rise of other powerful states by balancing against its rivals, pushing other states to contain rising

⁶⁴¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 34.

⁶⁴² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 21.

powers, and acting preemptively to remove a rival before it can become a true challenge.⁶⁴³ As discussed in chapter two, offensive realism was chosen as a framework of analysis due to its existing hegemonic focus and clear predictions for state behavior.

PREDICTIONS

If offensive realism was the guiding paradigm for U.S. policy in the South China Sea, I would expect to see four major trends in U.S. policy. First, the U.S. would actively seek to prevent the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea. This containment of China would likely take the form of preventing China from gaining any additional territory in the SCS, and preventing China from militarizing territory under its control, such as Scarborough Shoal. Second, the U.S. would pressure its allies in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific to contain the rising power of China. These allies could include the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, and the U.S. would seek to contain China through security alliances, increasing its allied military forces in the SCS, and garrisoning territory in the South China Sea to prevent further Chinese expansion in the region. Additionally, the U.S. could help improve the capacity of these allies to contain China by investing in their military infrastructure and capabilities. Finally, I would expect the U.S. to increase its military presence in the South China Sea. This increase could occur through a greater deployment of naval assets or military forces to bases in or near the South China Sea.

Observable Policy 2000-2008

Prediction: Is the U.S. actively seeking to prevent the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea through containment?

⁶⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 236-237.

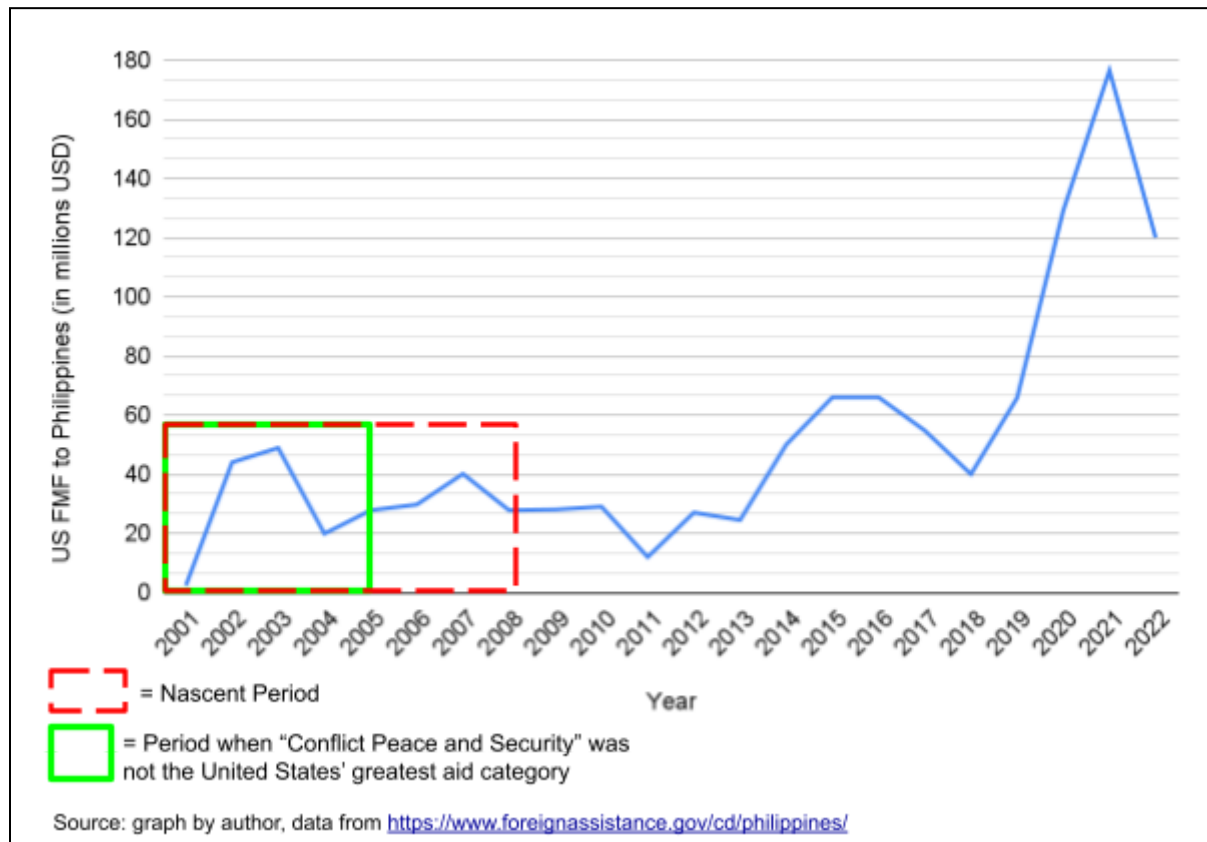
No. From 2000 to 2008 the United States did not actively prevent China from gaining more territory in the SCS. The 1995 DoS statement on the South China Sea states the U.S. is interested in the SCS disputes being resolved peacefully, but makes no provisions to protect those interests. Similarly, the DoS deemed two of China's claims "excessive," but the U.S. did not challenge these claims or prevent China from taking more SCS features.

Prediction: Is the U.S. pressuring or using its allies to contain the rising power of China? Is the U.S. improving the capacity of these allies to contain China? Is the U.S increasing its military presence in the South China Sea?

No. There is also no compelling evidence to suggest that the U.S. was pressuring its allies in the region to contain China. The U.S. was providing foreign military financing to the Philippines during this time, but as a figure 5.1 shows, FMF levels were relatively low from 2001-2008. Additionally, the majority of this FMF was aimed at helping the Philippines combat terrorism, not contain China. Finally, the United States' greatest aid category to the Philippines from 2001-2005 was not "Conflict Peace and Security," but "Developmental Food Aid," which indicates that enhancing the Philippines' military power was not the United States main priority. Given that the U.S. did not view China as powerful enough to threaten U.S. security during this time period,⁶⁴⁴ these findings are not surprising.

⁶⁴⁴ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024; Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024.

Figure 5.1: U.S. FMF given to the Philippines, Focus on 2001-2008



Therefore, based on this analysis, offensive realism does not explain the United States' policy regarding the South China Sea from 2000-2008, which is marked in table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Offensive Realism 1)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗			
Structural Liberalism				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ☹=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2009-2012

Prediction: Is the U.S. actively seeking to prevent the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea through containment?

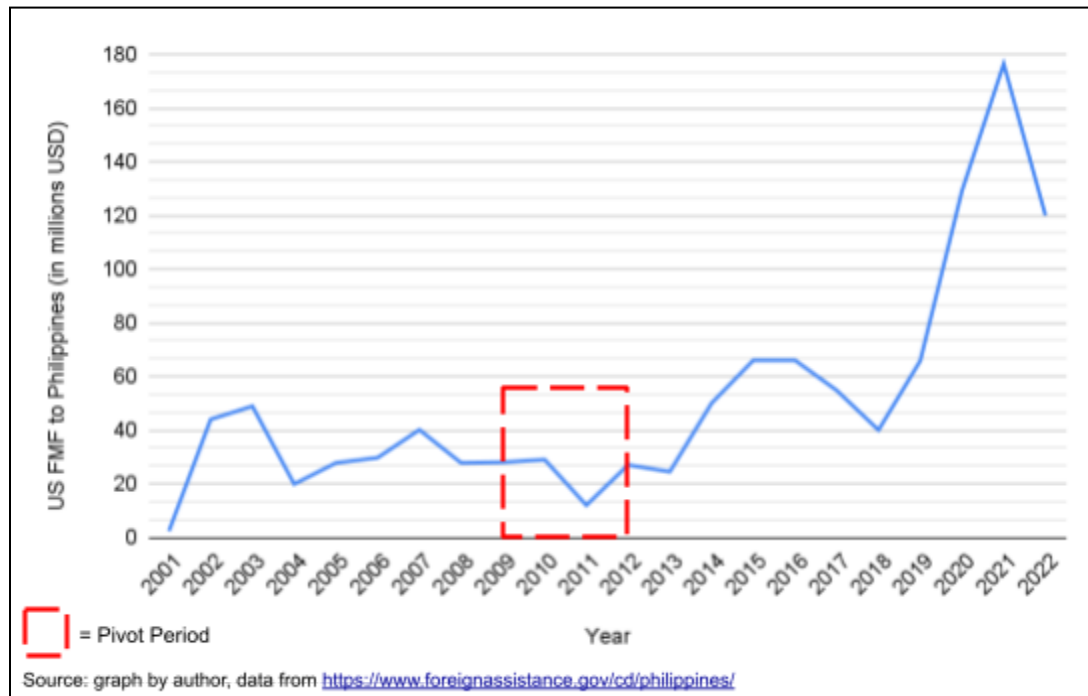
No. From 2009-2012 the United States slowly started increasing the number of Chinese SCS maritime claims it deemed excessive. The U.S. subsequently began conducting regular FONOPs in the South China Sea to challenge Chinese claims in 2012. However, offensive realism still does not explain the United States’ SCS policy for this time period. Hillary Clinton’s 2010 statement named the SCS as an area that the United States cares about, but she did not say the U.S. would intervene to ensure the disputes are settled peacefully. She also did not commit the U.S. to intervention if China attempted to seize more disputed territory. Similar to the 1995 State Department statement, this 2010 policy is more of a declaration of U.S. interests and a signal of increased U.S. attention in the region rather than an enforceable policy.

Prediction: Is the U.S. pressuring or using its allies to contain the rising power of China?

Unclear. During this period the U.S. introduced allies as an important interest in the South China Sea. Secretary Clinton's speech connected the SCS to an international interest in freedom of navigation, and signaled U.S. alignment with ASEAN. Additionally, another sign of increased U.S. support for its ally was the ratio of U.S. to Philippine forces in Balikatan. In 2012, the United States provided the majority of forces involved in Balikatan. However, Balikatan was only a bilateral exercise between the U.S. and the Philippines during this time period, implying that the United States was not building a coalition to balance against or contain China. Additionally, offensive realism fails to explain U.S. behavior during the Scarborough Shoal Stand-off in 2012. As chapter 3 explained in more detail, the U.S. not only failed to provide clear assurances to the Philippines to strengthen its position vis-a-vis China during this crisis, but the U.S. also appears to have pressured its ally to decrease tensions with China.⁶⁴⁵ Another factor that breaks with the predictions of offensive realism is the trends in U.S. FMF to the Philippines. As figure 5.2 shows, FMF was nearly at an all time low for the entire period of 2009-2012, despite "Conflict, Peace, and Security" being the largest sector of U.S foreign assistance to the Philippines three out of four years.

⁶⁴⁵ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 189-192.

Figure 5.2: U.S. FMF given to the Philippines, Focus on 2009-2012



Therefore, although the United States appears to be providing greater support for its allies and partners in Southeast Asia, it is not pressuring them to balance against China like offensive realism would predict.

Prediction: Is the U.S. improving the capacity of its allies to contain China?

No. The U.S. did signal a desire to improve the Philippines defense capabilities through its commitment of forces to Balikatan 2012. Additionally, the predominance of “Conflict, Security, and Peace” as a foreign assistance sector from 2009-2012 implies that the United States wanted to improve this area of the Philippines’ capabilities. However, the low amount of FMF given to the Philippines indicates that the United States did not monetarily follow through with those intentions.

Prediction: Is the U.S increasing its military presence in the South China Sea?

Unclear. The ratio of U.S. to Philippine forces in Balikatan could be interpreted as representing a display of U.S. power and capabilities in the South China Sea. The increase in FONOPs in the SCS in 2012 also implies that the U.S. wanted to present a greater military presence in the region. However, since neither the troops in Balikatan nor the FONOPs represent a multi-month rotational presence or permanent presence, this evidence cannot definitely prove that the U.S. increased its military presence in the South China Sea.

Conclusion: Although U.S. policy and behavior from 2009 to 2012 began to follow some of offensive realism's policy predictions, U.S. policy during this time was still far too ambiguous and timid to be explained by offensive realism. Therefore, table 5.3 marks that offensive realism does not explain U.S. policy during this time period

Table 5.3: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Offensive Realism 2)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗		
Structural Liberalism				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ○=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Prediction: Is the U.S. actively seeking to prevent the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea through containment?

Yes. From 2013 to September 2023 the United States adopted much firmer policies and stances regarding the South China Sea disputes. It declared the nine-dash line non-compliant with UNCLOS in 2014, openly objected to China's island building in 2015, extended the MDT to Philippines forces and military materials in the SCS in 2019, officially aligned its position on the SCS maritime disputes against China in 2020, and then declared almost all China's SCS claims invalid under UNCLOS in 2022. These policies were also accompanied by increasingly hawkish and confrontational rhetoric that implied the U.S. would back up its policies with force, especially in the case of the U.S.-Philippine MDT.

Additionally, the U.S. demonstrated its willingness to actively intervene in the South China Sea during this period. For example, the U.S. sent the *USS Blue Ridge* to Manila during the Second Thomas Shoal Crisis in 2014 and sent a U.S. P-8A to accompany the Philippine ship that ran China's blockade.⁶⁴⁶ At the same time, President Obama warned President Xi not to use force at Second Thomas Shoal on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in the Hague.⁶⁴⁷

Finally, the number of Chinese claims that the U.S. State Department deemed excessive and corresponding DoD FONOPs generally increased over this period. Although both these markers have decreased since 2020, they still imply that the United States is actively seeking to prevent the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea. This more proactive policy and behavior align with the predictions of offensive realism.

⁶⁴⁶ These actions were part of U.S. support for the Philippines during the Second Thomas Shoal Crisis in 2014, which is discussed in more depth in chapter 3.

⁶⁴⁷ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 219-225.

Prediction: Is the U.S. pressuring or using its allies to contain the rising power of China?

Yes. Over this time period the U.S. increasingly internationalized the issue of the South China Sea and began bringing its allies, partners, and security alliances to bear against the rising power of China. Although the U.S. struggled to maintain its alliance with the Philippines from 2013-2016, the number of U.S. forces involved in Exercise Balikatan increased steadily after 2017, taking into account the interruption of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This increase only became more rapid after 2021. Similarly, the growing number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama demonstrates that the United States increasingly sought to internationalize the South China Sea disputes, and use its allies to balance against China in the region.

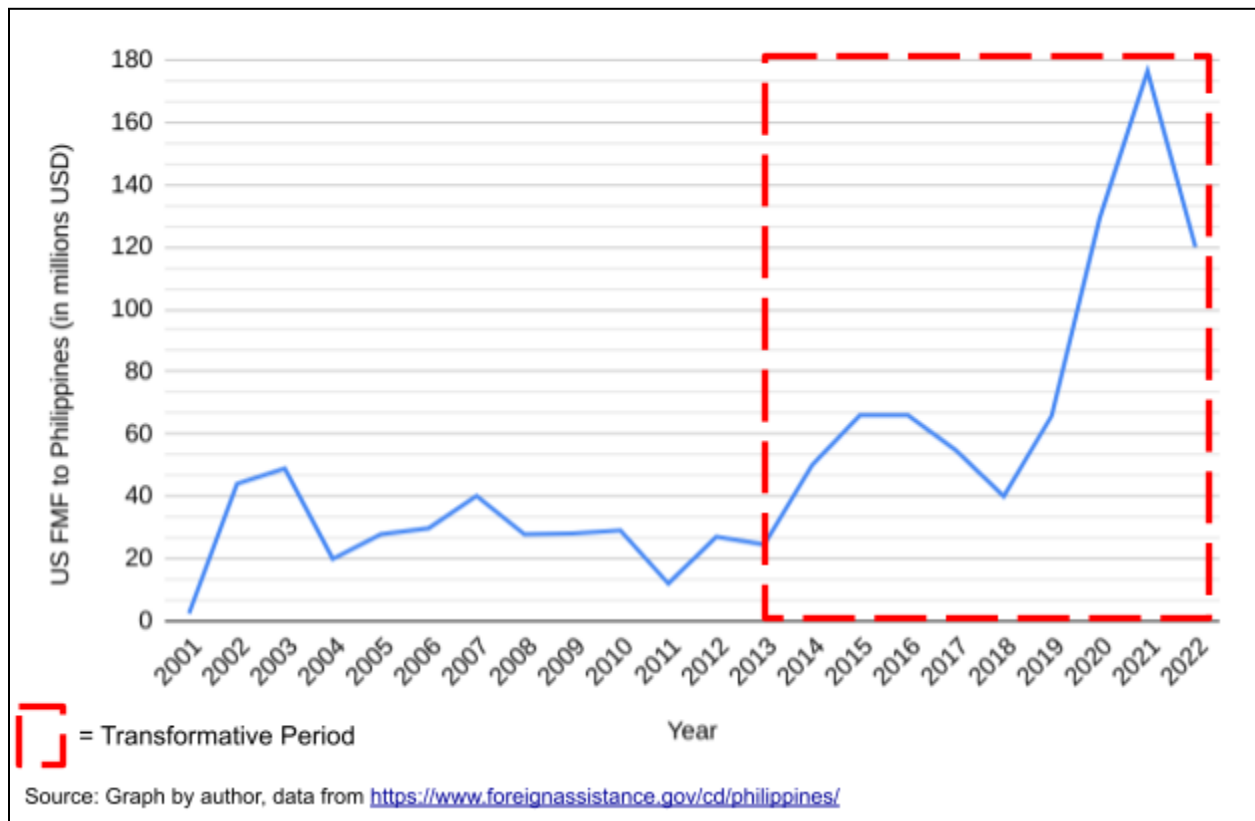
Finally, the inception of the AUKUS Trilateral Security framework in 2021, and the subsequent involvement of the United Kingdom in both MTA Sama Sama and Balikatan shows how the United States even began leveraging extra-regional allies to deter China. AUKUS especially shows the United States' desire to bring in stronger allies with more developed military capacities to help contain China.

Prediction: Is the U.S. improving the capacity of these allies to contain China?

Yes. U.S. investment in Balikatan and the growing size and scope of this increasingly multilateral exercise from 2013-September 2023 shows that the U.S. was attempting to increase the Philippines' ability to defend itself against China. Additionally, even accounting for factors like inflation, U.S. foreign military financing given to the Philippines has greatly increased over this period. Figure 5.3 shows that although the U.S. decreased the amount of FMF it provided the Philippines from 2016 to 2018, the 40 million in FMF the U.S. gave in 2018 was still higher than FMF given in most previous years. Then the rapid increase in the amount of U.S. FMF from

2019 to 2022 indicates a period of much greater investment in Philippines military capabilities. The United States also committed to enhancing Philippine bases, and thus improving Philippine military capabilities, under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Act in 2015.⁶⁴⁸

Figure 5.3: U.S. FMF Given to the Philippines, focus on 2013-2023



Additionally, the AUKUS agreement provides another compelling example of the United States improving its ally's military capacity. AUKUS contains a deal between the U.S., U.K., and Australia to provide Australia with quiet, nuclear powered submarines, presenting further

⁶⁴⁸ U.S. Embassy in Manila, "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) Factsheet," *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, March 20, 2023. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-edca-fact-sheet/>.

evidence that the U.S. was actively enhancing the abilities of its allies to counter China during this time period.⁶⁴⁹

Prediction: Is the U.S increasing its military presence in the South China Sea?

Unclear. It is ultimately unclear whether the United States is increasing its military presence in the South China Sea. The drastic increase in FONOPs from 2015-2020 does indicate a greater U.S. naval presence in the region, even though the number of FONOPs has decreased under the Biden administration. In a similar vein, the increasing size of Exercise Balikitan over this period is certainly a demonstration that the U.S. could invest significant capabilities and power in the region, but these shifts do not match offensive realism's predictions, which would call for something like a steady presence of ships or a constant series of rotational deployments to the SCS.

Dr. Holmes explained in an interview that the U.S. has been considering a more permanent military presence, such as garrisoning the First Island Chain to pursue an anti-access, area denial strategy against China, but those debates have yet to manifest in actual force movements.⁶⁵⁰ The one example of an attempt to increase the stable presence of U.S. forces in the region is U.S. forces temporarily stationed at Philippine bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. In 2015, the U.S. and Philippines negotiated for the U.S. to have access to five bases, and in 2023 that number was expanded to nine. U.S. forces and contractors could

⁶⁴⁹ Ashley Townshend, "The AUKUS Submarine Deal Highlights a Tectonic Shift in the U.S.-Australia Alliance," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 27, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/27/aucus-submarine-deal-highlights-tectonic-shift-in-u.s.-australia-alliance-pub-89383#:~:text=The%20deal%20consists%20of%20three,multibillion%2Ddollar%20pledge%20by%20all.>

⁶⁵⁰ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

be rotationally stationed at these bases to help improve Philippine capacity and infrastructure.⁶⁵¹ The EDCA also creates the possibility that U.S. forces could be stationed there on longer-term temporary assignments. Therefore, the EDCA could represent a more solid step towards the strategies for intervention that offensive realism calls for, but offensive realism still fails to explain the United States' caution in increasing its military presence in the region.

Conclusion: U.S. policy and behavior from 2012 to September 2023 followed most of the tenets of offensive realism, but this theory still fails to fully explain why the U.S. does not have a more significant military presence in the South China Sea. However, the increase in Philippine bases available to the U.S. does indicate that U.S. policy might be starting to align with this theory and could follow more significant offensive realist predictions in the future.

However, for this study, table 5.4 marks that offensive realism only partially explains U.S. policy from 2013 to September 2023, and fails to accurately predict U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea during the two earlier periods. Therefore, offensive realism cannot be used to explain U.S. policy for my entire time period and must be used in concert with other theories to properly analyze and predict U.S. policy. Offensive realism also should be used with other theories to explain why it became more applicable during this final period.

⁶⁵¹ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippine Air Base Gets U.S.-Funded Upgrade Under China Deterrence Plan," *U.S. Naval Institute*, January 29, 2024. <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/29/philippine-air-base-gets-u-s-funded-upgrade-under-china-deterrence-plan#:~:text=The%20Philippines'%20Department%20of%20National,communication%2C%20fueling%20and%20other%20infrastructure>.

Table 5.4: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Offensive Realism 3)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

TEST 2: STRUCTURAL LIBERALISM

Structural Liberalism is a liberal theory created by Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry to explain and justify the United States-led the Liberal World Order (LWO) and analyze its role in international politics. They argue that realism does not comprehensively explain the unique features of Liberal World Order, such as its degree of Western institutionalization, multilateral pattern, and stable acceptance of 'semi-sovereign' states.⁶⁵² Structural liberalism was chosen as a theoretical framework for this study because it demonstrates how the U.S. maintained American hegemony in the past and can help elucidate strong continuities in U.S. policy and hegemonic behavior. Additionally, if these continuities are not present, it can help reveal interesting implications for how the United States is formulating policy towards China in the South China

⁶⁵² Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 179-180.

Sea. Finally, structural liberalism is also useful for my study because it is a liberal theory aimed specifically at explaining hegemonic systems and provides specific predictions for hegemonic behavior.

PREDICTIONS

Structural liberalism predicts that the United States will attempt to integrate China into the Liberal World Order through the use of security co-binding, penetrated reciprocal hegemony, semi-sovereignty, economic openness, and civic identity. The U.S. could use these tools to pull China into the larger world order, or make China more amenable to the world order in peripheral areas like the South China Sea.

In the case of the SCS, “security co-binding” presents one of the strongest tools for preventing conflict, as the U.S. would bind itself and China to institutions to constrain one another’s behavior.⁶⁵³ This could manifest in the U.S. supporting, creating, or championing institutions that mitigate the dynamics of anarchy in the South China Sea. The structure of semi-sovereignty is also a potential method for bringing China into the LWO in the SCS. Through this structure, the U.S. could offer China partial sovereign recognition under the auspices of the Liberal World Order in return for China accepting a subordinate role in international politics and dropping its more extreme and threatening maritime claims.⁶⁵⁴ This could manifest in the U.S accepting some of China’s SCS claims through the legal precedent of *uti possidetis*, and allowing China to legitimately control the features in its possession in return for ceasing its expansionist behavior. Finally, the U.S. could also employ economic openness to

⁶⁵³ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 181-182.

⁶⁵⁴ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 188.

create institutions to abridge anarchy in the South China Sea, and encourage greater economic ties and interdependence between the SCS claimants and the United States.⁶⁵⁵

Observable Policy 2000-2008

Prediction: Is the United States using “security co-binding” to bind itself and China to institutions to constrain one another’s behavior?

Yes. From 2000-2008 the United States’ policy was governed by the 1995 State Department Statement. This statement declared that “the United States reaffirms its welcome of the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea,” and emphasized that the U.S would “view with serious concern” any maritime claims that broke with international law and UNCLOS.⁶⁵⁶ These declarations imply that the U.S. was attempting to use security co-binding to mitigate the tensions in the SCS in two key ways. The first way is by supporting a code of conduct for the South China Sea as declared by ASEAN, which would decrease the risk of conflict by making claimant state behavior more predictable. The second way is by requesting claimants follow the tenets of UNCLOS, which outlines ideal state behavior in maritime zones.

However, there are some caveats. During this period the U.S. had signed, but not ratified UNCLOS, meaning that it technically was not a party to this security-binding institution. Additionally, it was not employing FONOPs or diplomatically challenging Chinese claims that broke these agreements. However, the United States’ overall policy shows that it was rhetorically and politically promoting security co-binding, as predicted by structural liberalism.

⁶⁵⁵ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097589>, 192.

⁶⁵⁶ U.S. State Department, “Daily Press Briefing, May 10, 1995,” *Press Statement*, May 10, 1995 in Michael McDevitt, “The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future,” Washington D.C: CNA Analysis and Solutions, 2014. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf>, 1.

Prediction: Is the U.S. using the structure of semi-sovereignty to offer China partial sovereign recognition under the auspices of the Liberal World Order in return for China accepting a subordinate role in that order and dropping its more extreme claims in the SCS?

Yes. During this time period, the United States was officially neutral regarding the South China Sea Disputes. It did not challenge China's claims until 2007 and 2008, when the state department deemed two of its claims excessive in nature and noncompliant with UNCLOS. These claims were: (1) "Claims jurisdiction of superadjacent airspace over the exclusive economic zone" and (2) "domestic law criminalizes survey activity by foreign entities in any waters under the jurisdiction of the coastal state."⁶⁵⁷ Only the second of these excessive claims actually defies the precepts of UNCLOS and freedom of navigation, and it is unclear if the U.S. conducted a FONOP in the South China Sea to challenge these claims. This combination of data also does not mean that the U.S. had accepted China's *de jure* possession of the Paracel Islands and various features in the Spratlys. Therefore, it is unclear if the U.S. was employing semi-sovereignty in the case of the South China Sea.

However, both Ambassador Freeman and Dr. Paal mentioned in interviews that during this time, the United States was attempting to more broadly economically engage with China and profit from China's rise.⁶⁵⁸ If these broader attempts to leverage economic openness and cultural exchange to democratize China and lead it to accept a subordinate role in the Liberal World Order are taken into account, then lack of direct U.S. opposition to Chinese claims in the South

⁶⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, "Freedom of Navigation FY 07 Operational Assertions," Department of Defense: Washington D.C, 2007.
<https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/gsa/cwmd/FY2007%20DOD%20Annual%20FON%20Report.pdf>;
U.S. Department of Defense, "CHALLENGES TO EXCESSIVE MARITIME CLAIMS 1 OCTOBER 2007-30 SEPTEMBER 2008," Department of Defense: Washington D.C, 2008.
<https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/gsa/cwmd/FY2008%20DOD%20Annual%20FON%20Report.pdf>.

⁶⁵⁸ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024; Douglas Paal, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), January 26, 2024.

China Sea can imply that the U.S. was attempting to employ semi-sovereignty. However, this application of semi-sovereignty appears to have been at the broader U.S-China relations, rather than an explicit SCS policy choice.

Prediction: Is the U.S. employing economic openness to create institutions to abridge anarchy in the South China Sea and encourage greater economic ties and interdependence between the SCS claimants and the United States?

Yes. The 1995 State Department statement does not discuss U.S. economic policy regarding the South China Sea, but it does promote the declaration by ASEAN in 1992, which contained the goal of “further promoting conditions essential to greater economic cooperation and growth.”⁶⁵⁹ Additionally, looking at the United States’ SCS policy during this time frame in the context of broader U.S-China relations provides further evidence for a U.S. policy of economic openness. As mentioned previously, the U.S. was attempting to economically engage with China and profit from China’s rise.⁶⁶⁰ As a result the U.S. saw China as a potential source of markets and production, and helped China enter economic institutions like the World Bank. Therefore, even though the U.S. was not explicitly focused on economic openness in the SCS, it was likely employing economic openness in the region.

Conclusion: From 2000-2008, U.S. policy and behavior aligned with structural liberalism’s predictions. Therefore, table 5.5 marks that structural liberalism can be used to explain U.S. policy in the South China Sea during this period.

⁶⁵⁹ “1992 ASEAN DECLARATION ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA,” Manila, Philippines: July 22, 1992. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/1992-ASEAN-Declaration-on-the-South-China-Sea.pdf>.

⁶⁶⁰ Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024; Douglas Paal, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), January 26, 2024.

Table 5.5: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Structural Liberalism 1)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓			
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2009-2012

Prediction: Is the United States using “security co-binding” to bind itself and China to institutions to constrain one another’s behavior?

Yes. During this period U.S. policy regarding the South China Sea was governed by both the 1995 statement and Secretary Clinton’s 2010 remarks. These remarks placed even greater emphasis on the importance of UNCLOS, and declared the United States’ support for SCS claimants’ efforts to create a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. Additionally, Secretary Clinton stated that the U.S. was willing to be involved in “confidence building measures” to help resolve the disputes. From this statement, it is clear that the U.S. was promoting UNCLOS and a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea as security-cobinding institutions to reduce conflict in the region and resolve the disputes. Additionally, the U.S. was now willing to become involved and help facilitate the creation of new institutions and processes to help settle the disputes.

This statement was also accompanied by greater action in pursuit of security co-binding. First, the U.S. signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2010, joining a regional co-binding institution. Second, the State Department increased the number of Chinese claims it deemed excessive from 2010 to 2011, and in 2012 the U.S. conducted five FONOPs in the South China Sea. However, the United States still did not ratify UNCLOS during this period, showing that the U.S. wanted to bind China and other SCS claimants to institutions to protect the LWO, but was unwilling to commit to restricting its own behavior through these same institutions. Admiral McDevitt and Ambassador Freeman both highlight the hypocrisy of the United States' claim to uphold and defend UNCLOS when it is not party to the treaty as a continued problem for U.S. policy and sticking point with China.⁶⁶¹

Yet, as Dr. Smith explained in an interview, “notwithstanding the lack of advice and consent on the whole treaty,” the U.S. “does abide by and support the law of the sea” and “carry out its main tenet.”⁶⁶² Therefore, the United States did attempt to employ security co-binding in the South China Sea from 2009 to 2012 as predicted by structural liberalism.

Prediction: Is the U.S. using the structure of semi-sovereignty to offer China partial sovereign recognition under the auspices of the Liberal World Order in return for China accepting a subordinate role in that order and dropping its more extreme claims in the SCS?

Unclear. At this point, China was essentially a full participant in the LWO and the global economy. Although the U.S. was increasingly suspicious of China's intentions, it does not appear to have attempted to use semi-sovereignty to incorporate China into the LWO in the South China

⁶⁶¹ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024; Chas Freeman, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 12, 2024; Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024.

⁶⁶² Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024; Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024.

Sea. The United States increased its objections to some of China's claims in the SCS, and began running FONOPs to directly challenge these claims, demonstrating that the U.S. was not considering accepting China's *de jure* possession of any features. However, the U.S. still remained officially neutral on the legality of the various claims in the SCS. Therefore, the data cannot definitively prove or disprove that the U.S. was willing to employ semi-sovereignty in the South China Sea during this period.

Prediction: Is the U.S. employing economic openness to create institutions to abridge anarchy in the South China Sea and encourage greater economic ties and interdependence between the SCS claimants and the United States?

Yes. In her statement, Secretary Clinton highlighted the importance of economic openness in the South China Sea “because it is in the interest of all claimants and the broader international community for unimpeded commerce to proceed under lawful conditions.”⁶⁶³ Additionally, U.S. foreign direct investment in ASEAN increased from 2009 to 2010,⁶⁶⁴ signaling that the U.S. was increasing its economic investment in the region, perhaps to facilitate interdependence between ASEAN countries. These actions aligned with broader U.S. policy at the time, which was pivoting towards Asia as a focus for U.S. defense and economic policy. Therefore the United States was likely promoting economic openness in the South China Sea, even if that was not stated directly in policy.

⁶⁶³ Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at Press Availability,” Press Conference at National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010.
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

⁶⁶⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, “FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT INTO ASEAN IN 2010,” Jakarta, Indonesia, 2011.
“https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/resources/Statistics/2014/StatisticalPublications/fdi_statistics_in_focus_2010_final.pdf.”

Conclusion: The U.S. was employing several of the tools described by structural liberalism in the South China Sea, but its growing suspicion of China seems to have shifted it away from trying to accommodate China into the LWO in the SCS. Therefore, table 5.6 illustrates that structural liberalism can only partially explain U.S. policy in the South China Sea from 2009-2012.

Table 5.6: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Structural Liberalism 2)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●		
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2012-September 2023

Prediction: Is the United States using “security co-binding,” to bind itself and China to institutions to constrain one another’s behavior?

No. From 2013 to 2019 the United States placed greater emphasis on UNCLOS than any other co-binding institution and was particularly vocal about states respecting the convention’s guarantee of freedom of navigation, which China disagrees with. Additionally, despite Secretary Carter’s Keynote Address at the Shangri-la dialogue still framing China as a potential

“responsible stakeholder” in the Liberal World Order, he described China as out of step with that order and its beliefs. This changing U.S. perception of China is reflected in how the U.S. further expanded its security relationships with other countries in the region, but not China.

The U.S. strengthened its alliance with the Philippines in 2019 by clarifying that U.S. commitments under the MDT extended to Philippines service members in the SCS, and in 2020 hardened its support for UNCLOS and the Philippines against China by aligning its policy with the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Ruling. The U.S. also upgraded its relationship with ASEAN in 2015 to a strategic partnership,⁶⁶⁵ and created AUKUS with the U.K. and Australia in 2021. Finally, the increase in countries involved in MTA Sama Sama presents further evidence of the U.S. engaging in co-binding institutions with other countries, but not China. Therefore, these institutions should be viewed more as attempts to balance against China rather than bind the U.S. and China together to mitigate the risk of conflict in the South China Sea.

Prediction: Is the U.S. using the structure of semi-sovereignty to offer China partial sovereign recognition under the auspices of the Liberal World Order in return for China accepting a subordinate role in that order and dropping its more extreme claims in the SCS?

No. The United States’ policies from 2013-September 2023 increasingly opposed China’s claims in the South China Sea. The U.S. clarified its position against the nine-dash line in 2014, and followed the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Panel in dismissing most of China’s maritime claims in the SCS in 2020. Then in 2022 it declared almost all of China’s South China Sea maritime claims excessive and noncompliant with UNCLOS. The United States’ backed up these policy changes with increases in FONOPs in the SCS, especially from 2016-2020.

⁶⁶⁵ U.S. Mission to ASEAN, “U.S-ASEAN Timeline,” March 31, 2022.
<https://asean.usmission.gov/u-s-asean-timeline/#:~:text=2006%3A%20ASEAN%20and%20the%20United.name%20an%20Ambassador%20to%20ASEAN>.

It could also be inferred from the types of exercises that the United States started practicing with its allies in Exercise Balikatan that the U.S. was preparing to defend the Philippines against perceived Chinese aggression in the SCS. For example, Exercise Balikatan 2019 featured a littoral joint-exercise involving capturing an island in the SCS.⁶⁶⁶ This data indicates a hardening U.S. position against China's claims in the South China Sea, and less willingness from the U.S. to employ semi-sovereignty to bring China into the fold of the LWO.

Prediction: Is the U.S. employing economic openness to create institutions to abridge anarchy in the South China Sea and encourage greater economic ties and interdependence between the SCS claimants and the United States?

Unclear. The United States was still employing economic openness as a method for bringing China into the Liberal World Order during President Obama's second term. In terms of the United States' SCS policy, Secretary Carter's 2015 key-note address at the Shangri-la dialogue highlighted the United States' continued desire to foster "China's peaceful rise in a manner that promoted economic growth and regional stability."⁶⁶⁷ However, Secretary Carter simultaneously painted China as out of step with the Liberal World Order. By 2019 the U.S had fully shifted to viewing China as a threat to the LWO, with Secretary Pompeo stating in 2019 that Chinese actions in the SCS presented a threat to the Philippines' "economic livelihood."⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁶ Renato Cruz de Castro, "BALIKATAN 2019 AND THE CRISIS IN PHILIPPINE-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 23, 2019.
<https://amti.csis.org/balikatan-2019-and-the-crisis-in-philippine-china-rapprochement>.

⁶⁶⁷ Ashton Carter, "US Defense Secretary Gives Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue," Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2015.
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-defense-secretary-gives-keynote-address-at-shangrila-dialogue/2800510.html>.

⁶⁶⁸ Michael Pompeo, "Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability," Press Remarks, Manila, Philippines, March 1, 2019.
<https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>.

Therefore, it is clear that from 2013-2019 the U.S. changed from perceiving China as a target of economic openness to a threat to the United States' ability to maintain economic openness in the region. This aligns with the Trump Administration's changes to the United States' China strategies. According to Dr. Smith, the Obama Administration was always relatively hopeful about the U.S.-China relations, but the Trump Administration took a much more confrontational approach to China.⁶⁶⁹ This approach is best illustrated by the U.S.-initiated trade war with the PRC from 2018-2020. Although the Biden administration has sought to decrease this tension, it still approaches China through the lens of managed competition.

Additionally, the United States' shift away from employing economic openness is also connected to broader trends in China's economic rise. In 2013 China's economy was only a little more than half the size of the U.S. economy, valued at \$9.57 trillion (USD)⁶⁷⁰ compared to the United States GDP of \$16.84 trillion.⁶⁷¹ However, by 2019 China's economy had grown much faster than the United States' economy, with the Chinese economy expanding between 6-7.8% a year from 2013-2019⁶⁷² in comparison to the U.S. economy only growing between 1.8-2.9% annually.⁶⁷³ These unequal growth rates meant that by 2019 the Chinese GDP was worth roughly 2/3rds of the U.S. GDP, with China's GDP reported at \$14.28 trillion USD compared to the

⁶⁶⁹ Paul Smith, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 5, 2024.

⁶⁷⁰ GDP (current US\$) - China, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>.

⁶⁷¹ GDP (current US\$) - United States, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US>.

⁶⁷² GDP growth (annual %) - China, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>.

⁶⁷³ GDP growth (annual %) - United States, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=US>.

United States' \$21.38 trillion USD.⁶⁷⁴ This broader context indicates that economic openness might have become a less effective tool over time given the rapid rise and strengthening of the Chinese economy, prompting the U.S to abandon it as a tool for bringing China into the LWO.

Conclusion:. As table 5.7 illustrates, U.S. policy changed significantly enough from 2013 to September of 2023 that structural liberalism no longer effectively explains U.S. policy in the South China Sea during this period. This inability to predict U.S. policy during this final period also ensures that structural liberalism cannot explain U.S. policy for the entire time frame of 2000 to September 2023, meaning it must be used in concert with other theories to analyze changes in U.S. policy towards China in peripheral areas from 2000 to 2023. However, the explanatory power of structural liberalism for the majority of this time frame holds important implications for when changing U.S. perceptions of China manifested in its approach to U.S-China policy and the complacency of hegemons like the U.S. in peripheral areas.

⁶⁷⁴ GDP (current US\$) - United States, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US>.

Table 5.7: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Structural Liberalism 3)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory				
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory				
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

TEST 3: HEGEMONIC ORDER THEORY

Hegemonic order theory is a theory that combines hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory to explain how hegemonic orders function, maintain their legitimacy, and generate stable international systems, as well as how actors will behave when that order becomes unstable.⁶⁷⁵ Hegemonic stability theory claims that hegemony facilitates the creation of an international order and then maintains that order.⁶⁷⁶ The theory presumes that the military dominance of the hegemon gives it the capacity and will to enforce an international order and

⁶⁷⁵ Daniel H. Nexon, and Iver B. Neumann, “Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 662–686.

⁶⁷⁶ Jelena Belic and Zoltan Miklosi, “Cosmopolitanism and Unipolarity: The Theory of Hegemonic Transition,” *Critical review of international social and political philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2023): 181–203.

provide benefits to parties in that order.⁶⁷⁷ This theory was developed by Robert Keohane,⁶⁷⁸ and then amended by Stephen Krasner and Robert Gilpin.⁶⁷⁹ Krasner and Gilpin's "coercive model of leadership" focuses on the hegemon's effectiveness at coercing other states and imposing itself as a centralized authority.⁶⁸⁰ This model emphasizes how subordinate states balance the costs and benefits of participating in the hegemonic system, and will only accept their exploitation as long as the costs of acceptance are less than the costs of overthrowing the hegemon.⁶⁸¹

Power transition theory was first created by A.F.K. Organski in 1958,⁶⁸² and argues that states are placed in a hierarchical pyramid of international relations, where the hegemon "controls the existing dominant international order." Within this pyramid of relations states are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the international system, but the status quo is ultimately determined by the dominant state in the system, the hegemon.⁶⁸³ A power transition becomes possible when a rising dissatisfied state becomes more powerful than the declining dominant state.⁶⁸⁴ Organski and Kugler define this situation as a rising state achieving "parity" with the

⁶⁷⁷ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 589.

⁶⁷⁸ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 581.

⁶⁷⁹ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 585–590.

⁶⁸⁰ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 588.

⁶⁸¹ Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614, 587–589.

⁶⁸² A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

⁶⁸³ Charles J. Koch, "Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 88.

⁶⁸⁴ Charles J. Koch, "Testing the Power Transition Theory with Relative Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 3 (2021): 86–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48621952>, 89

dominant power,⁶⁸⁵ but parity is overall difficult to measure. When parity occurs, the rising power must decide whether to challenge the hegemon, and the hegemon must decide whether to resist that challenge, or acquiesce and allow the rising power to become dominant.⁶⁸⁶ However, Ciwan M. Can and Anson Chan argue that nuclear weapons significantly increase the costs of major war, and therefore modern great powers must limit their competition to fighting for relative strategic advantage and influence instead of through kinetic conflict.⁶⁸⁷ In the system of hegemonic order theory, power transition theory only comes into play when there is a dissatisfied challenger to the global world order. Therefore, hegemonic order theory can explain international relations even if power transition theory itself does not apply to a given time period.

PREDICTIONS

Since hegemonic order theory has two parts, it also generates two separate predictions for U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea. First hegemonic stability theory predicts that the U.S., as the global hegemon, should be able to provide “public goods” to the members of the Liberal World Order, which can be an open economic system or security guarantee. The U.S. also should be able to use its predominant power to exclude non-participants from benefiting from the global world order.

Then, hegemonic order theory suggests that during shifts in the global world order, power transition theory comes into play. According to PTT, if the U.S. perceives China as approaching or achieving parity and an imminent danger of creating a power transition, then it should respond

⁶⁸⁵ A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 49.

⁶⁸⁶ Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, “When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?” *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 4 (1992): 896–922. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111353.898-899>.

⁶⁸⁷ C.M Can and A Chan, “Preventive or Revisionist Challenge During Power Transition? The Case of China–USA Strategic Competition.” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(1) (2022): 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221076646>, 12-13.

by increasing the resources devoted to protecting its interests, maintaining its commitments, and supporting its position in the international system. This behavior could manifest in the U.S. launching a preemptive war, or, based on Can and Chan's version of PTT, the U.S. should mainly compete with China for relative strategic advantage and influence in the South China Sea. It is important to note that the final two predictions of PTT are only testable if the U.S. believes China is approaching parity.

Observable Policy 2000-2008

Hegemonic Stability Theory:

Prediction: Is the United States providing a "public good" that all members can participate in?

Yes. From 2000 to 2008 the United States provided an overarching economic system through its support of institutions like the WTO and World Bank. The 1995 State Department Statement also demonstrates that the U.S. provided an overarching set of values for international relations and state behavior in the South China Sea through its promotion of no use of force, support for freedom of navigation, and interest in peace and stability in the region.

Prediction: Is the U.S. able to at least partially exclude non-participants from benefiting from the system?

Yes. From 2000 to 2008 the United States was able to exclude non-participants from the U.S.-led economic system and from its security guarantees. During this period these exclusions were not directed at China or the South China Sea because, as Professor Martinson highlighted in an interview, China was not perceived to have the capabilities to enforce claims that broke with the liberal world order.⁶⁸⁸ Additionally, the U.S. was likely more interested in bringing China into

⁶⁸⁸ Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024.

the LWO through economic and cultural interaction than punishing it over its hypothetical claims in the SCS. However, the U.S. did exclude countries like North Korea through U.S. sanctions⁶⁸⁹ and by supporting UN sanctions of the DPRK, proving it had the capability to restrict access to “public goods.”⁶⁹⁰

Power Transition Theory

Prediction: Does the United States perceive China as approaching or achieving parity?

The Bush Administration's 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* shows that the United States acknowledged the possibility of China one day being able “to compete militarily with the United States.” However, it states that the U.S. was unlikely to face such competition in the near future.⁶⁹¹ Additionally, nothing in the 1995 State Department Statement indicates that the United States was concerned about China openly infringing on its interests in the SCS. Furthermore, Professor Martinson and Dr. Holmes point out that there was no reason for the U.S. to view China as a present threat from 2000-2008 since China did not possess the capabilities to challenge the United States militarily, even though experts did begin to worry about Chinese military modernization.⁶⁹² Therefore the U.S. did not perceive China as achieving parity, and was not concerned about a power transition.

⁶⁸⁹ Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “Fact Sheet: North Korea Sanctions,” *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, May 11, 2022. <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-north-korea-sanctions/>.

⁶⁹⁰ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Making Sense of UN Sanctions on North Korea,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Interactive dashboard*, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/north-korea-sanctions>.

⁶⁹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington D.C. 2001), 4, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2001.pdf?ver=AFts7axkH2zWUHncRd8yUg%3D%3D>.

⁶⁹² Ryan Martinson, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), February 27, 2024; James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

Conclusion: From 2000 to 2008 the hegemonic stability theory accurately predicted U.S. behavior in the South China Sea. However, since the U.S. did not perceive China as achieving parity, power transition theory does not apply to this period. Therefore table 5.8 marks that HST is applicable to this time period, but PTT is not. The strong predictive power of hegemonic stability theory for U.S. policy during this period and the subsequent lack for the application of power transition theory also indicates that hegemonic order theory accurately explains U.S. policy during this period.

Table 5.8: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Hegemonic Order Theory 1)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓			
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗			
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2009-2012

Hegemonic Stability Theory:

Prediction: Is the United States providing a “public good” that all members can participate in?

Yes. From 2000 to 2013 the United States continued to provide an overarching economic system. Hillary Clinton's 2010 remarks also show that the U.S. continued to provide overarching values and rules for international relations and state behavior in the South China Sea through its promotion of no use of force, support for freedom of navigation, and interest in peace and stability in the region. Additionally, the U.S. began greater enforcement of freedom of navigation during this time, protecting that public good for all states in the South China Sea and beyond.

Prediction: Is the U.S. able to at least partially exclude non-participants from benefiting from the system?

Yes. Despite the 2008 Financial Crisis, the United States was able to continue to exclude non-participants from its security guarantees and monetary system. For example, the U.S. sanctioned Iran over its non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in 2011. These sanctions blocked Iran's access to the international financial market and hurt Iran's oil and petroleum sector.⁶⁹³ Despite increasing suspicion of China, the Obama Administration's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review clearly articulates that the U.S. still believes China can play "a more substantial and constructive role in international affairs."⁶⁹⁴ Therefore the U.S. was not actively trying to exclude China from the LWO even though it had the power to do so.

⁶⁹³ The White House, *Fact Sheet: Sanctions Related to Iran*, Washington D.C: Office of the Press Secretary, July 31, 2012.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/31/fact-sheet-sanctions-related-iran#:~:text=In%20June%202010%2C%20President%20Obama,access%20to%20the%20international%20financial.>

⁶⁹⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington D.C. 2010), 31, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

Power Transition Theory

Prediction: Does the United States perceive China as approaching or achieving parity?

No. Secretary Clinton's 2010 remarks indicate a shift in U.S. position away from China towards the other SCS claimants. Additionally, the Obama Administration's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review displayed concern with China's military modernization and rapid economic expansion.⁶⁹⁵ However, these policies do not indicate that the U.S. saw China as a significant threat. Additionally, neither U.S. policy nor rhetoric paint China as a threat to U.S. primacy. However, there are inklings of U.S. concern, as shown by the U.S. military beginning to publicize the forces and exercises involved in Balikatan in 2012 which could be interpreted as an attempt to clearly show U.S. strength and capabilities.⁶⁹⁶ Another example of growing U.S. concern with China was the increase in FONOPs and challenges to Chinese maritime claims. Yet, China's economy was still half that of the United States, ensuring the U.S. was not concerned about China's economic power.⁶⁹⁷ Therefore, the U.S. did not perceive the PRC as approaching parity during this period, even as it began to worry about China as a future threat.

Conclusion; From 2009 to 2012 hegemonic stability theory predicts and explains U.S. policy regarding China in the South China Sea. However, the U.S. still did not perceive the PRC as achieving parity, despite concerns about that potentiality in the future. Therefore power transition

⁶⁹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, (Washington D.C. 2010), 31.
https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

⁶⁹⁶ Mike Meares, "Balikatan 2012 Officially Opens," *U.S. Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, April 16, 2012. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/86830/balikatan-2012-officially-opens>.

⁶⁹⁷ GDP (current US\$) - China, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>; GDP (current US\$) - United States, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, ID: NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US>.

theory once again does not apply to this period, even though hegemonic order theory as a whole still has strong explanatory power for this period, as marked in table 5.9.

Table 5.9: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Hegemonic Order Theory 2)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓	✓		
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗	✗		
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2013-September 2023

Hegemonic Stability Theory:

Prediction: Is the United States providing a “public good” that all members can participate in?

Yes. Overall the United States continues to provide a free-market, capitalist economic system for the LWO from 2013-September 2023. In the South China Sea, it also provided security architecture for SCS claimants against China, such as its alliance with the Philippines, comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam, and strategic partnership with ASEAN. Additionally, the United States enhanced its security alliances in the region through AUKUS, and ramped up its enforcement of UNCLOS and protection of freedom of navigation through

FONOPs. However, many of these “public goods” are now aimed at containing and deterring China’s assertive behavior in the South China Sea.

Prediction: Is the U.S. able to at least partially exclude non-participants from benefiting from the system?

Unclear. During this period, the United States was able to use its control of the economic system to punish China for what the Trump Administration perceived as unfair Chinese trade practices and Chinese theft of U.S. intellectual property.⁶⁹⁸ However, because the U.S and China are connected in numerous ways that make their economies interdependent, the resulting U.S.-China Trade War from 2018-2020 negatively impacted both countries. It especially hurt the United States, costing the U.S. 300,000 jobs and an estimated 0.3% of real GDP by September 2019.⁶⁹⁹ Given that the U.S accepted a deal to end the trade war in 2020 that “largely resembled the offer Beijing had put on the table from the start,” it is likely that excluding China from the U.S. economic system hurt the U.S. more than China.⁷⁰⁰ Therefore, it is ultimately unclear if the United States is willing to endure the costs of excluding China from benefiting from the LWO, or is even able to fully cut China out of the global financial system.

⁶⁹⁸ Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, “More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America,” *Brookings*, August 7, 2020.
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/#:~:text=The%20trade%20war%20caused%20economic,t%20hire%20as%20many%20people.>

⁶⁹⁹ Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, “More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America,” *Brookings*, August 7, 2020.
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/#:~:text=The%20trade%20war%20caused%20economic,t%20hire%20as%20many%20people.>

⁷⁰⁰ Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, “More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America,” *Brookings*, August 7, 2020.
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/#:~:text=The%20trade%20war%20caused%20economic,t%20hire%20as%20many%20people.>

Power Transition Theory

Prediction: Does the United States perceive China as approaching or achieving parity?

Yes. Although it is difficult to assess parity on a larger geopolitical level, three pieces of evidence indicate the U.S. believed China was close to achieving parity in the South China Sea during this period. First, the shift in U.S. policy from reactive at the beginning of this period to proactive at the end, combined with the more hawkish rhetoric and specific, focused policies show that the U.S. was deeply concerned about China's behavior in the SCS. The U.S. would only be concerned about Chinese behavior if it believed China had the capabilities to challenge U.S. interests in the region. Second, the United States' increasing focus on internationalizing the SCS disputes and working with allies in the SCS implies a U.S. desire to contain and balance against China in the region. This trend is evident in the increased U.S. FMF to the Philippines and the increasing multilateralism in Exercise Balikatan and MTA Sama Sama. Finally, the increase in U.S. actions to deter China shows that the U.S. is worried about the PRC as a genuine challenger. These deterrent actions include the increase in FONOPs, especially from 2015 to 2020, the growing size of U.S. forces involved in Exercise Balikatan over time, and increasing U.S. deterrent statements aimed at China.

Prediction: (1) Is the U.S. increasing the resources devoted to protecting its interests, maintaining its commitments, and supporting its position in the international system? (2) Is the U.S. competing with China for relative strategic advantage and influence in the South China Sea?

Yes. The United States is increasing the resources devoted to protecting its interests and maintaining its commitments in the South China Sea. The U.S. is then using these increased resources to compete for allies, advantage, and influence in the region. The U.S. has overall

increased its FMF to the Philippines from 2013-2023, and starting in 2019 has devoted greater amounts of forces to Balikitan than the Philippines. Likewise, the increase in FONOPs during this period indicates the U.S. was devoting larger amounts of resources to supporting its position in the international system. This data demonstrates that the U.S. has increased both the economic and military resources devoted to its position and commitments in the South China Sea.

Additionally, the United States is increasingly competing with China for influence and allies in the region, as exemplified by its greater support for the Philippines. For example, in 2019 the U.S. finally clarified its commitments under the MDT to protect Philippine military personnel and materials in the South China Sea. This move was likely made to shore up U.S.-Philippine relations after the Duterte presidency and ensure the next Philippine government did not seek to align with China. Additionally, AUKUS, and the United States bringing in extra-regional powers for its annual “bilateral” exercises in the region, are examples of the U.S. balancing against China in their competition for power and influence in the region.

Finally, the DoS released three legal studies focused on the South China Sea during this period. Two focused on China and determined that China’s claims in the SCS are non-compliant with UNCLOS. The other study focused on the Philippines, and found the Philippines to be largely compliant with UNCLOS. Not only are these studies meant to legally support the Philippines and challenge China, but no comparable studies were released in the preceding two periods. This trend implies a greater interest and devotion of U.S. resources to taking sides in these disputes and investigating the legality of China’s claims in the SCS.⁷⁰¹

Conclusion: Hegemonic order theory explains U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea from 2000 to September 2023. As hegemonic order theory predicts, during this period the United

⁷⁰¹ The studies are listed in chronological order here: <https://www.state.gov/limits-in-the-seas/>.

States maintained an international order that China became increasingly dissatisfied with. As the U.S. perceived Chinese growing dissatisfaction and increasing parity with the United States, the U.S. began to devote greater attention and resources to the South China Sea to compete with China for allies, power, and influence in the region. Therefore, table 5.10 shows that together both parts of hegemonic order theory can explain U.S. policy in the SCS, with hegemonic stability theory predicting U.S. policy throughout the entire time frame and power transition theory becoming important during the last period as the U.S. perceived China to be achieving parity.

Table 5.10: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Hegemonic Order Theory 3)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	◐	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	◐	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗	✗	✓	✓
Brinkmanship				

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ◐=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

TEST 4: BRINKMANSHIP

Brinkmanship is a strategy meant to address the complications introduced into interstate competition by nuclear weapons. When two nuclear states both possess a secure second strike capability, they exist in a state of mutually assured destruction. The dynamics of MAD present nuclear weapons states with a credibility problem. States still want to compete and coerce each other, but one nuclear armed state cannot credibly threaten another nuclear state with nuclear forces.⁷⁰² Brinkmanship is meant to address this question, explain how states accidentally engage in conflict despite their intentions, and why the manipulation of risk in a world with nuclear weapons is a valuable coercive strategy.⁷⁰³

According to Thomas Schelling, a state can use various measures, such as trip-wire forces or issue linkages, to credibly signal its resolve during a crisis, and that it may be forced to engage in conflict, even involving nuclear weapons, despite its intentions.⁷⁰⁴ Unlike offensive realism, structural liberalism, and hegemonic order theory, brinkmanship is not used to predict a state's foreign policy or explain why a state would choose a particular foreign policy. Instead, brinkmanship is useful for understanding state behavior in competition and conflict. Therefore, brinkmanship is used in this study to explain how the U.S is pursuing its goals in the South China Sea and why it might be engaging in unpredictable and risky behavior over an area that until recently many people did not see as vital to its interests.

⁷⁰² Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016, 20.

⁷⁰³ Thomas C. Schelling and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 91.

⁷⁰⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, "The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959, 4; Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International security* 47, no. 3 (2023): 9–51, 1.

PREDICTIONS

In an interview, Director Sharman explained that China has been engaging in brinkmanship in the South China Sea,⁷⁰⁵ and both scholarly sources and U.S.-government supported media organizations, like Radio Free Asia, have promoted the narrative that China is pursuing brinkmanship in the SCS.⁷⁰⁶ Given its goals in the South China Sea and the United States' position as the major impediment to Chinese aspirations in East Asia, this brinkmanship is likely occurring vis-a-vis the United States.

So, if the U.S. is a hegemon engaging in brinkmanship with China in the South China Sea, I would expect to observe the U.S making choices that increase the likelihood that a conflict could occur accidentally. The U.S. could employ hand-trying measures to show its resolve to defend the Philippines or interests like freedom of navigation in the SCS. The U.S. could also increase drills with allies and freedom of navigation operations in or around the South China Sea to increase its presence in the region and enhance the risk that an encounter could lead to escalation if China allows its navy to behave aggressively or recklessly while U.S. ships or assets are in the area. These drills could be used to demonstrate U.S. capabilities, and signal its resolve to defend its allies in Southeast Asia. Finally, there would likely be an increase in deterrent statements from the U.S. to China. These could appear in official policy documents, conversations between leaders, or in speeches made by prominent U.S. officials.

⁷⁰⁵ Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via Phone), April 2, 2024.

⁷⁰⁶ Robert A. Manning, "Under Cover of Pandemic, China Steps Up Brinkmanship in South China Sea," *Foreign Policy: Elephants in the Room Series*, May 14, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/south-china-sea-dispute-accelerated-by-coronavirus/>; Chris Taylor, "China-U.S. military near-misses may point to new Chinese 'brinkmanship' strategy." Radio Free Asia June 7, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinasea/scs-near-misses-06072023102958.html>.

Observable Policy 2000-2008

Prediction: Is the United States employing hand-tying measures in the South China Sea?

No. From 2000 to 2008 the United States was not employing hand tying measures in the South China Sea. The 1995 State Department Statement links issues in the SCS to broader U.S. interests, such as freedom of navigation and international law, but it does not commit the United States to any action. This statement is not meant to deter or signal resolve, it is simply a statement of interest. Additionally, there was not a significant number of U.S. forces in the region to force the U.S. to become involved in a conflict with China over the South China Sea.

Prediction: Is the U.S. increasing its presence in the region to increase the risk of an accident?

No. My quantitative data and policy analysis do not indicate that the United States was not increasing the risk of an accident with China during this period. There is hardly any data or reporting on major U.S. bilateral exercises during this time, indicating a lack of interest in the region and a lack of resolve to defend U.S. interest in the SCS. Additionally, the data on FONOPs does not suggest that the U.S. was conducting enough Freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea to raise the risk of conflict escalation.

This lack of desire to create risk does not mean there was no risk of accidents leading to either a diplomatic or military crisis during this time period. The EP3 Incident in 2001 over the South China Sea is a strong example of how risky behavior, misinformation, and misperception almost drove the U.S. and China into a dangerous crisis. The accident occurred because a Chinese J-8 fighter jet collided with an American EP-3 surveillance aircraft while making a series of aggressive close passes of the EP-3. The collision killed the Chinese pilot, and forced the EP-3 to make an unauthorized emergency landing at Lingshui airfield on the Chinese island

of Hainan.⁷⁰⁷ When the accident originally occurred, both sides blamed the other for it. U.S. officials at the time claimed that based on the nature of the crash, it was impossible for the U.S. EP-3 to have caused the accident. However, Chinese officials had been informed the U.S. was the one at fault and stuck with that narrative, leading both sides to escalate the diplomatic crisis through statements to the media and in negotiations.⁷⁰⁸ Although the EP-3 incident did not cause an international conflict, this accident shows how there was still a risk of an unintended conflict erupting between the two powers in the region, even if the United States was not intentionally increasing that risk.

Prediction: Is the U.S. making deterrent statements regarding the South China Sea? Is it signaling a redline for China in the South China Sea?

No. The only significant U.S. statement on the South China Sea during this time came from that 1995 DoS statement. The Bush Administration barely referenced the region otherwise. The rhetoric in that statement is mild and non-confrontational. It does not convey a desire to become involved in the disputes, or any explicit warnings for what would happen if a claimant state used force in the South China Sea.

Conclusion: The United States was not engaging in brinkmanship in the South China Sea from 2000 to 2008. This finding, marked in table 5.11, is unsurprising given that the SCS was not a priority for the U.S. during this period. The U.S. had neither the need nor desire to engage in

⁷⁰⁷ Naval History and Heritage Command, “EP-3 Collision, Crew Detainment, Release, and Homecoming,” Collection Number: AR/695, 2021.
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/archives/Collections/ncdu-det-206/2001/ep-3-collision--crew-detainment-and-homecoming.html>.

⁷⁰⁸ Joseph W. Prueher, “A U.S.-Chinese Mid-Air Collision and “The Letter of Two Sorries,” *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, April 18, 2016.
<https://adst.org/2016/04/a-u-s-chinese-mid-air-collision-and-the-letter-of-two-sorries/>.

brinkmanship with China in the SCS during this period. Additionally, given the limited nature of Chinese capabilities at the time, it is unlikely China would have wanted to engage in brinkmanship with the U.S either.

Table 5.11: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Brinkmanship 1)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗	✗	✓	✓
Brinkmanship	✗			

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2009-2012

Prediction: Is the United States employing hand-tying measures in the South China Sea?

No. U.S. policy from 2009-2012 was largely defined by Hillary Clinton’s 2010 remarks in Vietnam. Although these remarks did connect the South China Sea to broader issues of international law, support for allies, and freedom of navigation, it once again did not indicate any U.S. intention to enforce its interests in the SCS. This reticence was seen clearly in the muted U.S. response to China’s standoff with the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal. In fact, the United States’ lack of military intervention, and belated diplomatic efforts, signaled a lack of

U.S. resolve in the region. Additionally, the United States did not have forces in the region that could act as tripwire forces in the case of conflict in the South China Sea.

Prediction: Is the U.S. increasing its presence in the region to increase the risk of an accident?

Unclear. From 2009 to 2012 the United States did begin running FONOPs in the South China Sea, and began publicizing numbers of forces involved in Balikatan, indicating that relatively large U.S. exercises were occurring in the region. In fact, the naval portion of Balikatan 2012 occurred off the coast of Palawan facing the South China Sea, hinting at an acknowledgement of the troubles connected to the SCS.⁷⁰⁹ However, these FONOPs and exercises do not seem to have significantly increased the risk of an accident between the United States and China in the SCS.

Yet, there was still the risk that a misunderstanding, encounter, or accident could cause a U.S.-China conflict. As discussed in chapter 3, the *USNS Impeccable* was harassed by Chinese vessels in 2009 while conducting a survey of the area. *The Impeccable* was confronted by Chinese Maritime Militia and naval vessels, forced to emergency stop to avoid crashing into one of the Chinese vessels harassing it, and then surrounded by the Chinese ships. Although there was no outbreak of violence, it is easy to see how someone could react fearfully in such a situation and accidentally cause such a confrontation to escalate to violence. From this perspective, an increase in U.S. FONOPs during this period did increase the risk that similar events to the *Impeccable* Incident could occur, and lead to an accident. However, even though the risk of accident existed, the United States did not seem to be intentionally seeking this type of risky interaction out, nor did it appear to be manipulating that risk during this period. Therefore, the U.S. was not engaging in brinkmanship.

⁷⁰⁹ Mike Meares, “Balikatan 2012 Officially Opens,” *U.S. Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, April 16, 2012. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/86830/balikatan-2012-officially-opens>.

Prediction: Is the U.S. making deterrent statements regarding the South China Sea? Is it signaling a redline for China in the South China Sea?

No. The United States did not make deterrent statements to China regarding the South China Sea during this period. Even during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-off, the U.S. did not attempt to signal to China that it would become militarily involved in the conflict if China continued or escalated the standoff. In fact, the U.S. refusal to issue such a deterrent in the form of clarifying how the U.S.-Philippine MDT extended to Philippine forces in the SCS likely signaled to China that the U.S. was not committed to defending its ally in the South China Sea.

Conclusion: The United States was not engaging in brinkmanship vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea from 2009 to 2012, nor did it have any reason to. Although the U.S. was nominally pivoting its military forces and foreign policy focus to Asia, it was not in active competition with China yet. Therefore, it had no reason to run risks over an issue in the South China Sea or commitment to the Philippines, as marked in table 5.12

Table 5.12: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Brinkmanship 2)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	●	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	●	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗	✗	✓	✓
Brinkmanship	✗	✗		

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ●=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

Observable Policy 2013-September 2023

Prediction: Is the United States employing hand-tying measures in the South China Sea?

Yes. From 2013 to September 2023, the United States made several policy choices that could be interpreted as hand tying-tying measures that would force it to intervene in the South China Sea. The first is through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement bases open to U.S. forces in the Philippines. The U.S. and the Philippines agreed to five EDCA bases in the Philippines in 2015, which after a delay due to the Duterte government’s pro-China policy, were opened to U.S. forces in 2019. An additional four bases were added in 2023.⁷¹⁰ These bases represent two types of U.S. commitments to the region. First, under the EDCA, the U.S. committed to improving these facilities, meaning that the U.S. is investing funds in these bases

⁷¹⁰ U.S. Embassy in Manila, “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) Factsheet,” *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, March 20, 2023. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-edca-fact-sheet/>.

and that U.S. contractors could be stationed there during construction. Second, these bases represent a potential commitment of U.S. forces to the region since U.S. forces and assets can be rotationally stationed in the vicinity of the SCS for longer periods of time. These forces could represent a potential tripwire should they become caught in the crossfire of a Sino-Philippine conflict.

Second, the issue of the South China Sea has become increasingly linked to the U.S. commitment to Taiwan and broader U.S.-China competition. Admiral McDevitt explained that one of the United States' motivations for pursuing EDCA sites was because the U.S. wanted access to bases in proximity to Taiwan.⁷¹¹ Similarly, China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has been tied to its goals regarding Taiwan, such as straining the U.S. commitment to its unofficial ally.⁷¹² Meanwhile, former Assistant Secretary Sbragia argued that both Taiwan and the South China Sea are inimical issues that are tied to the "broader kinds of tectonic plates of US-China strategic competition on a global scale and for the long term," leading to policymakers adopting a "not one more inch" mindset that ensures neither side can let go of these peripheral issues because "the whole world will collapse."⁷¹³ These linkages between the SCS and Taiwan, and the South China Sea and the U.S. position in the U.S.-China competition, could be attempts to demonstrate the United States' commitment to the region despite its previous indifference. For example, by tying the issues in the South China Sea to Taiwan, the United States is setting up a situation where it might be forced to intervene in the SCS, even if it does not want to, or else risk bringing into question its commitment to Taiwan and reputation as a reliable ally. In this

⁷¹¹ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

⁷¹² Sophie Wushuang Yi, "Understanding China's efforts to bridge the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait disputes," *The Lowy Institute: Theinterpreter*, March 13, 2024. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/understanding-china-s-efforts-bridge-south-china-sea-taiwan-strait-disputes>.

⁷¹³ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024.

way, the SCS gains outsized importance because it represents the United States' commitment to its allies and willingness to compete with China. The United States cannot abandon the South China Sea, or else damage its reputation moving forward.

Prediction: Is the U.S. increasing its presence in the region to increase the risk of an accident?

Yes. The United States drastically increased the number of FONOPs it conducted in the South China Sea from 2013 to 2020, and still continued them at a reduced rate in 2021 and 2022. These FONOPs can be viewed as risky for a number of reasons. The first is that they often challenge Chinese claims near heavily militarized Chinese facilities, such as their artificial island military bases. This proximity naturally raises the risk that someone could make a mistake and start a conflict.

Second, Dr. Heer explained that FONOPs are inherently risky during this period because the Chinese have different interpretations of what kind of activity requires prior notification, and they also obviously have different interpretations of where freedom of navigation applies...the Chinese have their kind of straight baselines claim around the Spratlys and the Paracels, and some of our freedom navigation operations are intended specifically to challenge China's particular definition of what constitutes its territorial waters.⁷¹⁴

Essentially, because the U.S. and the PRC have conflicting interpretations of what UNCLOS allows in various maritime zones, there is the chance that an accident between the two sides could occur. For example, as discussed in chapter 3, China believes that vessels conducting “innocent passage” through littoral states' EEZ and territorial sea must provide that state with prior notification. The United States does not believe prior notification is required under UNCLOS and therefore refuses to notify China in advance when it conducts FONOPs or sends military vessels through the South China Sea. These conflicting interpretations could lead to a

⁷¹⁴ Paul Heer, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024.

situation where Chinese vessels confront American vessels aggressively, since they did not know the U.S. vessel was coming, leading to an accident. Similarly, it could lead to an accident where both sides refuse to make amends because they both believe they were in the right due to their interpretation of UNCLOS, leading to unnecessary and uncontrolled escalation of hostilities.

Additionally former Assistant Secretary Sbragia argued that the U.S. has “a very heavy deterrence presence to include doing things that really are kind of pokey to China,”⁷¹⁵ which include freedom of navigation operations. In this framework, freedom of navigation is risky because during this period FONOPs have taken on a deterrent connotation. Dr. Holmes explained that despite FONOPs intention as an operationalization of a diplomatic protest, people in Washington have increasingly treated FONOPs as a way to deter China in the gray-zone.⁷¹⁶ Based on how China reacts to FONOPs, such as sending two warships to intercept a FONOP in the SCS in 2018,⁷¹⁷ China likely shares this view of FONOPs as a U.S. show of strength and an attempt to deter China in the SCS. At the very least, the PRC views them as provocative.⁷¹⁸ Therefore, the U.S. is increasing the risk of an accident through the increased number of FONOPs in the South China Sea. However, Admiral McDevitt highlights that the actual risk of an accident escalating in the South China Sea due to an incident is low, and Director Sharman points out that the U.S. and China have a long history of naval interaction and therefore know

⁷¹⁵ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024.

⁷¹⁶ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

⁷¹⁷ William Gallo, “Despite China’s Objections, US to Continue Freedom of Navigation Operations,” *Voice of America News*, May 29, 2018.
<https://www.voanews.com/a/china-objections-us-freedom-of-navigation-operations/4415234.html>.

⁷¹⁸ John Grady, “China Taking Hard Line on Military Flybys, Freedom of Navigation Operations, Says Panel,” *United States Naval Institute*, July 26, 2023.
<https://news.usni.org/2023/07/26/china-taking-hard-line-on-military-flybys-freedom-of-navigation-operations-says-panel>.

how to act around each other.⁷¹⁹ So how much risk the U.S. is generating from FONOPs is unclear.

Finally, the United States has increased the risk of an accident in the South China Sea by internationalizing the disputes and bringing in extra-regional allies like Canada and the United Kingdom. Director Sharman pointed out that China deeply dislikes the United States bringing in these external partners, and that China finds this behavior provocative. Additionally, he argues that the presence of these actors raises the chance of accidents in the South China Sea because, unlike the United States which has experience dealing with risky Chinese maritime maneuvering, actors like Canada do not. This means that an incident could arise between one of these U.S. allies in the South China Sea and the Chinese, drawing the U.S. and the broader world into a conflict.⁷²⁰

Prediction: Is the U.S. making deterrent statements regarding the South China Sea? Is it signaling a redline for China in the South China Sea?

Yes. The United States has made several deterrent statements to China regarding the South China Sea during this period. The first occurred in 2014, when China first tried to force the Philippines to abandon its makeshift base on Second Thomas Shoal by blockading the feature. During the crisis, President Obama warned President Xi not to use force at Second Thomas Shoal. Although there were likely other factors involved, this warning likely restrained

⁷¹⁹ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024; Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via phone), April 2, 2024.

⁷²⁰ Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via phone), April 2, 2024.

Chinese behavior during this crisis, as China did not use force to stop the Philippines from running the blockade to resupply the base.⁷²¹

The next deterrence statement occurred in 2015 over Scarborough Shoal. During this incident, it appeared China was interested in militarizing Scarborough Shoal, causing President Obama to warn President Xi on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit that Scarborough was a red line for the United States and building a base on this reef would negatively impact Sino-U.S. relations.⁷²² It appears this threat was effective, as China withdrew its survey ships and has still not built an artificial island base on Scarborough Shoal as of April 2024.⁷²³

Finally, in 2020 the U.S. declared that the U.S.-Philippine MDT extended to the Philippine forces, vessels, ships, and other military installations in the South China Sea. This statement was much broader than previous attempts to deter China, as it was not aimed at simply one feature or issue, and instead addressed countless future scenarios in the SCS. This statement could be interpreted as committing the U.S. to intervene if China attacked a Philippine garrisoned feature or used force against Philippine vessels anywhere in the SCS. Therefore, the threat was: if China used force against the Philippines in the SCS, the U.S. would intervene militarily to defend its ally. Although this threat has not stopped China from harassing Philippine vessels with water cannons and air horns in the South China Sea, it seems to have been at least partially effective at deterring China from seizing Philippine claimed features. Although, it is

⁷²¹ Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 219-225.

⁷²² Gregory B. Poling, *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225.

⁷²³ The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative's page on Scarborough Shoal is updated frequently, and the current status of the shoal can be found here: <https://amti.csis.org/scarborough-shoal/>.

important to note China continues to send patrols through the Philippine's EEZ, as well as harass Philippine ships near features like Second Thomas Shoal.⁷²⁴

Additionally, several U.S. actions in the South China Sea can be viewed as containing a deterrent threat. The first is FONOPs, which have taken on a deterrent connotation during this period, as discussed above. The second are U.S. force numbers and the number of countries involved in U.S. bilateral exercises in the SCS. The increasing number of forces involved in Balikatan, as well as the increasingly running exercises connected to the SCS, can be read as attempts to demonstrate U.S. capabilities and capacity to deter Chinese aggression. For example, Balikatan 2019 was highlighted for containing an island seizing drill and Balikatan 2023 was notable for culminating in a live-fire drill where U.S. and Philippine forces used a patriot missile to destroy a ship.⁷²⁵ Similarly, the U.S. could be increasing the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama to deter China by signaling the strength of U.S. allies and alliances. These suggestions are supported by the media's increasing connection of exercises like Balikatan to the South China Sea disputes and the U.S. support for the Philippines.⁷²⁶ Therefore, it is clear that the United States was attempting to deter China in the South China Sea through redline statements and shows of strength.

⁷²⁴ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Timeline of Chinese Harassment of Second Thomas Shoal Resupply Missions," *United States Naval Institute News*, April 4, 2024.
<https://news.usni.org/2024/04/04/timeline-of-chinese-harassment-of-second-thomas-shoal-resupply-missions>

⁷²⁵ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Kill Chain Tested At First-Ever Balikatan SINKEX," *NavalNews*, April 27, 2023
Lariosa, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/04/kill-chain-tested-at-first-ever-balikatan-sinkex/>.

⁷²⁶ For example see: Large-Scale Balikatan Military Exercise," *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2022.
<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-us-kick-off-large-scale-balikatan-military-exercise/>; Jim Gomez and Aaraon Favila, "US, Filipino forces start war drills in region facing Taiwan," *Associated Press*, March 28, 2022.
<https://apnews.com/article/china-taiwan-philippines-manila-armed-forces-f985b504e922d2db06e124e9a4578d26>.

Conclusion: From 2013 to September 2023 the United States does appear to have engaged in the beginnings of a brinkmanship relationship with China, as shown in table 5.13.

Table 5.13: Testing Theories for U.S. Policy in the South China Sea (Brinkmanship 3)

Theory	Nascent Period: 2000-2008	“Pivot” Period: 2009-2012	Transformative Period: 2012-Sep 2023	Applicable 2000-Sep 2023?
Offensive Realism	✗	✗	◐	✗
Structural Liberalism	✓	◐	✗	✗
Hegemonic Order Theory: Hegemonic Stability Theory	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hegemonic Order Theory: Power Transition Theory	✗	✗	✓	✓
Brinkmanship	✗	✗	✓	✗

✗=Does not explain U.S. Policy, ◐=Partially explains US Policy, ✓=explains US Policy

As mentioned in my review of brinkmanship theory, brinkmanship is a nuclear theory, which may lead people to believe brinkmanship does not apply to the South China Sea. However, brinkmanship is a useful theory for examining U.S. behavior in the SCS because the U.S. could either be risking the outbreak of a limited nuclear war or running the risk of a potential conventional war. Which of these risks the United States is attempting to manipulate through its behavior in the South China Sea depends on which side of the stability-instability paradox U.S. policymakers are on and how strong the stability-instability paradox is in the SCS.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Glenn Snyder argued that nuclear weapons create a stability-instability paradox, which argues that nuclear weapons reduce the risk of major war, but

do not prevent lower level conflicts, like proxy wars.⁷²⁷ Robert Jervis further explains that the fear of nuclear war makes international relations stable at the level of major war, but makes lower levels of violence more possible because states feel they have the operational space to engage in provocative behavior, even to the point of military action at lower levels of violence. Thus, international relations at these lower levels become more unstable.⁷²⁸ The stability-instability paradox only functions if policymakers believe that nuclear deterrence provides room for conventional escalation and conflict.

If U.S. policymakers do not believe the stability instability paradox, then my testing indicates that the U.S and China could be engaging in nuclear brinkmanship during my third period from 2013-2023. China and the U.S. are engaging in brinkmanship because they are two nuclear powers who appear to be conducting increasingly risky behavior to demonstrate their resolve over their respective interest in the South China Sea. This risky behavior, including dangerous maneuvering of naval vessels, red line statements, increase in presence in the region, and internationalizing the issue, increases risk because they increase the likelihood of a conflict and are a number of ways conventional war can turn into nuclear war. One is through inadvertent escalation. Barry Posen argues in *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* that a conventional conflict can escalate to a nuclear conflict if conventional operations degrade the confidence of a state in the usability or survivability of its nuclear forces.⁷²⁹ For example, if one belligerent in a conventional conflict launches a missile attack that either deliberately or accidentally substantially degrades the second belligerent's second strike nuclear forces, this

⁷²⁷ Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror" in *Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury, San Francisco: Chandler (1965).

⁷²⁸ Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>, 619.

⁷²⁹ Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

attack could lead the victim state to preemptively use its nuclear forces out of fear that it will lose this capability in the future. Another example is that a state could perceive an attack that damages its nuclear early warning system as a major escalation in the conflict or a signal of its opponent's intention to use nuclear weapons.⁷³⁰

With this framework in mind, any conflict between China and the U.S. in the South China Sea could have the potential to escalate inadvertently, especially if the United States or its allies launch attacks against Chinese military bases in the South China Sea or on the Chinese mainland. If a U.S. or allied operation damages Chinese nuclear capabilities, or vice versa, this conventional conflict could quickly escalate to a limited nuclear war. Studies on U.S. and Chinese nuclear use in the case of Taiwan indicate that at least some U.S. scholars and policymakers do not believe in the stability-instability complex, and think that escalation to nuclear use in a conflict with China is a possibility that the U.S. must ultimately be prepared for.⁷³¹ Therefore, even though neither side discusses a potential conflict in the SCS in nuclear terms, risky behavior in the South China Sea inherently raises the danger of nuclear war.

However, if U.S. policymakers believe that the stability-instability paradox is strong in the case of the South China Sea, then the risk the U.S. is running through its attempts at issue-linkages, deterrent actions, and deterrent statements is conventional war. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that few scholars discuss the South China Sea in reference to nuclear weapons. A notable exception is a recent report by Matthew Kroenig on a U.S-China conflict over Taiwan, where he argues that these artificial islands in the South China Sea are potential

⁷³⁰ Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 2-3.

⁷³¹ For example, see Greg Weaver, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis," *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, November 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Weaver-Role-of-Nuclear-Weapons-in-Taiwan-Crisis.pdf>; Matthew Kroenig, "Deliberate nuclear use in a war over Taiwan: Scenarios and considerations for the United States," *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, November 30, 2023.

targets for a U.S. limited nuclear strike because they are legitimate, fixed military targets and “striking them poses a relatively low risk of escalation.”⁷³² However, few scholars examine whether a nuclear conflict could break out over the disputes in the South China Sea itself. Instead, most discussions of conflict in the SCS seem to be concerned about conventional war: namely an encounter between claimants erupting into a shooting war. Admiral McDevitt explained in an interview that the most extreme version of this scenario, and what seems to be the major concern, is one where the U.S. ends up in a conventional war with China in the SCS due to an altercation with the Philippines.⁷³³

I therefore suggest that what the United States might be risking through its use of provocative FONOPs, hand-tying EDCA-based troops, and deterrent statements could be the threat of conventional war. Although conventional war is theoretically a lower-stake conflict than nuclear armageddon, it could be more threatening in a situation like the South China Sea because it is far more real than nuclear war, and because the stability-instability paradox suggests it is much easier for states to become involved in a lower-level conventional conflict.

First, the risks are higher because both the U.S and China have demonstrated their willingness to engage in conventional conflicts. In contrast, Nina Tannenwald discusses at length in her book *The Nuclear Taboo* about how policymakers are psychologically primed to reject nuclear war as something inherently evil. Second, the United States might set the brink at

⁷³² Matthew Kroenig, “Deliberate nuclear use in a war over Taiwan: Scenarios and considerations for the United States,” *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, November 30, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Kroenig-Deliberate-Nuclear-Use-in-a-War-over-Taiwan.pdf>, 15.

⁷³³ Michael McDevitt, interview by author, Boston (via Zoom), January 10, 2024. Exact quote: “[the MDT] is the only part of our policy that strongly suggests that the United States could actually become militarily involved in actual combat with an enemy of Manila’s. I believe it was hard for Washington to come to this judgment because legally the Philippine claim for most of the Spratly archipelago is essentially a legal absurdity. (See my study on the SCS for a fuller discussion of this claim.) It’s very hard to wrap your head around the fact that there is a possibility that the US could become in a shooting war with China that stems from Spratly features the Philippines claim.”

conventional war because brinkmanship is a battle of wills and the United States is likely less resolved over the South China Sea than China. In the South China Sea, U.S. policymakers would face an uphill battle against psychological dread once the conflict escalates to a certain point because all the data from chapter four and five indicate that the U.S. mainly cares about the SCS because it is an arena for larger U.S.-China competition. Meanwhile, Dr. Holmes explained that reclaiming perceived lost sovereignty in the South China Sea is part of China's dream for rejuvenation, an issue with widespread national support that no Chinese leader could afford to give up if he wishes to remain in power.⁷³⁴ Brinkmanship is essentially a game of chicken, and in this game the U.S. would likely lose if the stakes are nuclear war. However, if the stakes are conventional war where the U.S. still has a chance at winning, then the United States might have the resolve to run that risk to protect its allies, interest, and position in the world order.

However, even this discussion does not truly reveal what the United States is truly risking in the South China Sea. Fundamentally, my findings from my test of brinkmanship from 2013-2023 reveal that the United States and China are bargaining through signaling. The U.S. is using these issue linkages, FONOPs, bilateral exercises, and deterrent statements vis-a-vis China to try to determine who gets to do what and where in the SCS. They are clearly bargaining, and employing the risk of some sort of escalation in the South China Sea disputes, but it is still unclear how strong is the stability-instability paradox in this region. This uncertainty leads to questions like: How well does the stability-instability paradox apply to the sort of lower-level disputes and conflicts occurring in the South China Sea? Future studies will have to examine the hypothesis presented in this discussion to determine the answer to these questions.

⁷³⁴ James Holmes, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), March 7, 2024.

TRENDS AND CONCLUSIONS

As this series of tests show, the theory with the strongest explanation for U.S. policy in the South China Sea from 2000 to 2023 is hegemonic order theory, represented by hegemonic stability theory and power transition theory. Structural liberalism was able to predict U.S. policy for period one and partially explain period two, while brinkmanship explained U.S. behavior in response to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea from 2013 to September 2023. Finally, offensive realism only partially explained U.S. policy during my third period, making it the weakest theory for this case of the South China Sea.

This breakdown of each of these theories' explanatory powers indicates four important trends. First, the United States shifted its policy from liberalism to one dominated by fear of shifts in the global world order, with the transition period occurring from 2009 to 2012. This shift coincides with the United States' transition from complacent and reactive policy in the South China Sea, to proactive and even confrontational policies in the region. Therefore this trend indicates that structural liberalism is a paradigm better suited to explaining state behavior and policy during times of stability, as it is able to mitigate problem states to a certain degree through existing tools and institutions. In contrast, the power transition portion of hegemonic order theory is associated with more proactive and confrontational policies, but not to the point of preemptive war. Instead, PTT in practice more closely resembles Can and Chan's predictions that states will seek to maximize relative influence, and Mearsheimer's predictions for policies meant to balance against the rising power through use of allies. Finally, brinkmanship is also a strategy used during power transitions and competition for prestige and influence in a region.

Second, this testing shows that hegemonic stability theory has very strong explanatory power for hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas. Hegemonic stability theory is mainly

discussed at the level of global relations and in terms of the hegemon's overall influence on international politics. However, this study implies that it can also be applied to specific areas, such as peripheral regions, to examine the stability of the different types of orders involved in the overall world order. For example, in the SCS certain tenets of the Liberal World Order are under dispute, but not all of it. China is not challenging the U.S.-led financial system, but is challenging the U.S.-led rules-based maritime order. This study shows that hegemonic stability theory can be used to explain these sub-orders, raising interesting implications for how different levels of an international order can be stable and unstable simultaneously.

Third, this study highlights the necessity of examining foreign policy over long periods of time and breaking it down into time frames, as opposed to examining it as one single long policy, especially in peripheral areas. This study shows that a state's foreign policy is influenced by different factors over time, and instead of having a single foreign policy towards a peripheral area, states instead have many smaller policies influenced by larger geo-political events and changing state motivations. Trying to examine foreign policy as a single, overarching policy will obscure the factors driving change and could disconnect trends in the periphery from overarching changes in international politics.

Four, scholars should examine U.S. policy towards China in peripheral areas, and hegemonic behavior during shifts in the global world order through a framework that applies structural liberalism, hegemonic order, and brinkmanship to state behavior and foreign policy over time. This framework requires a longer-term period of at least a decade because my testing shows that a state's foreign policy towards peripheral areas tends to change over time in relation to larger shifts in international relations and state priorities. Hegemonic behavior and policy towards a peripheral area should then be examined through the following theories in order:

structural liberalism, then hegemonic order theory, and finally brinkmanship. Structural liberalism is applied first because I found that structural liberalism is a theory best suited to explaining hegemonic behavior to maintain the status quo. It is also applied first because the time period where structural liberalism loses its explanatory power is connected with a shift in the international order from stability to instability. Hegemonic order theory is then applied to confirm whether this instability is the result of a hegemon perceiving that the rising power has achieved parity. The power transition theory portion of hegemonic order theory will then help contextualize and explain hegemonic behavior in response to this change in the international balance of power. Finally, examining the case for brinkmanship dynamics will reveal how resolved the hegemon is over a peripheral area and how it is responding to the rising power in terms of policy and behavior.

The final chapter of this thesis will lay out these conclusions for how the United States changed its behavior towards China in peripheral areas from 2000 to September 2023. It will also apply them to my broader question on how hegemonic behavior changes during shifts in the global world order. Finally, this chapter will provide the implications of these findings for theory and practice, and address how future research can expand on questions arising from the findings and implications of this thesis.

CHAPTER 6

WHEN THE GIANT STIRS TO ACTION

We've started to get our game face on. Some good things are happening, but it takes a very long time to get a big institution like the Navy, the military, or the US Government to change course and start doing what it appears is necessary.

—Paul Smith, interview with author

This thesis began with the following research question: How did the United States change its policy in peripheral areas towards China from 2000-september 2023? This question is important because it helps us understand to what extent hegemonic behavior in peripheral areas changes during times of instability in the global world order. This study helps fill gaps in existing scholarship and assists policymakers by allowing them to better understand the dynamics at play in peripheral areas. It also will provide them with the tools to better analyze policy decisions and craft more effective foreign policy.

Scholarship claims that hegemons will behave aggressively during shifts in the global world order and preemptively attempt to eliminate a rising power before it can overturn the global hierarchy. I find that hegemons will instead behave reactively and attempt to deal with the rising power using existing structures within the world order, especially in peripheral areas. Once the hegemon perceives the rising power as a credible threat to the world order, the hegemon will become more proactive, but not to the point of preemptive war. Instead, when the giant finally stirs from its complacency, it will contest the rising power along the periphery, compete with it for relative strategic power and influence, and test its resolve over areas of interest. These findings hold implications both for the nature of hegemons as international actors and for how policymakers in a leading power should approach policy making.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

There are four main results of my study of U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea from 2000-September 2023. First, the United States became much more interested and involved in the South China Sea over time, fundamentally changing the “peripheral” status of the SCS. In 2000, the United States’ policy regarding the South China Sea was broad and non-interventionist in nature, matched by a lack of U.S. activity in the region. However, that began to change in 2010 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the U.S. was interested in the South China Sea. Following her remarks, U.S. policy became increasingly specific and explicit in its opposition to Chinese maritime claims in the SCS, matched with U.S. behavior to oppose China and support its allies, including an increase in FONOPs and a greater number of forces sent to participate in bilateral exercises in the South China Sea.

Second, the United States shifted from being a reactive actor in the South China Sea to a proactive player in the region. U.S. policy from 1995 to 2015 was largely reactive, responding to Chinese seizure of features or other external events in the South China Sea. However, starting with the extension of the U.S.-Philippine MDT in 2019, the U.S. began to more proactively formulate policy to challenge Chinese claims and behavior in the SCS.

Third, the U.S. increasingly included allies in its South China Sea policy over this period, and made greater attempts to internationalize the SCS disputes. During the early years of U.S. policy towards the SCS, the U.S. only advocated for its interests in the region, such as no use of force and respect for international law. However, the U.S. brought allies into the equation in 2010, and then made them central to the United States’ interests in the region beginning with Secretary Carter’s speech in 2015. After 2015, the U.S. truly focused its policies on supporting its ally the Philippines and also increasingly brought extra-regional actors into the SCS disputes

to balance against China. These attempts to internationalize the South China Sea are evident in the increasing number of countries involved in bilateral exercises like MTA Sama Sama and security frameworks like AUKUS.

Fourth, the United States changed from a policy aligning with the tenets of structural liberalism and hegemonic stability theory, to one aligning with the explanations of power transition theory and behavior characteristic of brinkmanship. My testing revealed structural liberalism best predicted and explained U.S. policy towards China in the South China Sea from 2000 to 2008, and U.S. policy still continued to follow some of its predictions until around 2015. However, by 2014 the U.S. was increasingly following a policy best described by the power transition mechanisms of hegemonic order theory, such as engaging in competition for relative strategic influence. Starting in 2015 the U.S. also started to make policy choices that appear to manipulate the risk of conflict in the South China Sea as the U.S. and China attempted to use signaling to bargain over what types of state behavior were appropriate in this region.

However, there were several limitations to this study of U.S. policy in the South China Sea that must be taken into account when examining these findings. First, there were gaps in the quantitative data for numbers of FONOPs and forces involved in Exercise Balikatan. These gaps are generally clustered in my first period (2000-2008) because the government, media, and scholarly sources I used did not include data for these years. These gaps mean that my findings for my first period are weaker than for my second and third period, and that a study including this data could find different trends in U.S. behavior. However, I contextualized this data in broader trends of U.S-China relations and combated any biases in my data by using multiple sources. Therefore, I am relatively confident that my findings are generally representative of trends in U.S. policy and behavior.

A second limitation is the author's limited ability to read Mandarin and inability to read primary sources in Southeast Asian languages like Tagalog. The addition of primary sources in these other languages would have added depth to this study. Nonetheless, I did employ English sources to gain an understanding of the Chinese perspective on U.S.-China competition. I also spoke to subject matter experts to ensure I had a comprehensive understanding of the South China Sea, South China Sea claimants, and U.S-China relations in the region. These two methods combined with my use of a few Chinese-language sources ensures that my study and its findings still contain richness and depth.

Finally, the generalizability of my argument that brinkmanship applies to the case of the South China Sea is limited by its novelty. I discuss in chapter five how my data suggests that the U.S. was engaging in brinkmanship with China from 2013 to September 2023. I then examine the debate about whether the U.S. is running the risk of limited nuclear war or a conventional war in the South China Sea. Although this discussion raised important points about U.S. behavior, and how policy decisions regarding brinkmanship are connected to the applicability of the stability-instability complex, these points are largely theoretical. Little scholarly research has been conducted on brinkmanship between two powers in a peripheral area, or on how brinkmanship might work if the brink is conventional rather than nuclear war. Since I was working in largely uncharted territory, my hypothesis that the U.S. would choose to set the brink for its brinkmanship with China in the SCS at conventional war must be subject to further examination or testing. The idea that setting the brink at conventional war is a strategy for circumventing a lack of resolve in bargaining is interesting, but since this new application of brinkmanship was not the focus of my thesis, this idea must be accepted with optimistic skepticism.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

My findings from chapters four and five reveal that offensive realism has the least explanatory power for U.S. policy in the South China Sea. In contrast, hegemonic order theory had the greatest explanatory power, followed by structural liberalism and then brinkmanship. This ranking, and the progression from structural liberalism to interstate competition under power transition auspices and brinkmanship, indicates that the U.S. was a complacent power in the South China Sea for most of the twenty first century, but that it changed its approach to the region and became a proactive actor because of the rising power of China.

This finding holds two important implications for the U.S. policy in the South China Sea. First, the SCS became less peripheral to the United States over time because it was increasingly viewed through the framework of the U.S.-China competition. This change indicates that great power competition influences the relative importance of regions and issues, and that the United States should be careful in areas like the SCS to remain focused on its vital interests. Second, the U.S. should remain proactive in the South China Sea. The United States' reactive policies from 1995 to 2015 did not protect its interests in the South China Sea. Not only did they fail to force China to follow the rules of the LWO in the region, but they almost cost the United States' its ally the Philippines. In contrast, the United States' proactive policies, including expanding the MDT and internationalization of the SCS, have helped it maintain its position, allies, and alliances in the region. Therefore, the United States cannot afford to be complacent in the South China Sea again unless it is willing to sacrifice its vital interests in the region.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS:

My findings contribute to the ongoing debate about hegemonic behavior during times of power transitions, the role of peripheral areas in the competition between hegemonies and rising powers, and the strategies hegemonies can employ to protect their world order.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

This study has four important theoretical implications. First, a state's foreign policy is not static nor made up of a single policy, especially in peripheral areas. Foreign policy changes over time because it is made up of numerous smaller policies that are influenced by larger geo-political events. Changes to a state's foreign policy can be gradual, or abrupt, but the overarching shifts in international relations, alterations to state attitudes, and shifting motivations behind these policy changes will be lost if foreign policy is not examined using multiple theories over a long-period of time.

Second, I present a new theoretical framework for examining hegemonic behavior in the periphery during periods of instability in the global world order. This framework calls for a hegemon's foreign policy to be examined over a long time frame using a specific sequence of theories. Scholars should examine hegemonic behavior through the lens of structural liberalism, then hegemonic order theory, and then finally examine the case for brinkmanship dynamics. Scholars should use this framework because it elucidates all the dynamics at play in changes to hegemonic behavior regarding the periphery over time. These factors can be missed if scholars only examine hegemonic behavior and policy using a single theory. For example, this framework revealed how the growing power of the rising power weakens the strength of various tools in structural liberalism, leading the hegemon to attempt a more competitive approach that employs

deterrence signaling to bargain over adherence to the global world order. Additionally, this framework is useful because it has a strong temporal component. I found that the explanatory power of each theory is correlated with the intensity of the competition between the hegemon and rising power. If the competition is still limited, then structural liberal predictions will prevail. However, if the rising power is perceived as a threat to the world order, the hegemon will adopt a more competitive approach.

Third, I find that nuclear weapons have a mitigating effect on hegemonic behavior. Can and Chan argue that nuclear weapons significantly increase the costs of major war and decrease the likelihood of victory through the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Therefore, modern great powers have to limit their competition to fighting for relative strategic advantage and influence.⁷³⁵ My findings support this hypothesis. Starting in the third period of this study (2013-September 2023), the U.S. was a hegemon facing a rising power in the South China Sea, and China was openly challenging the precepts of the Liberal World Order. However, increasingly hawkish policy from the United States, including engaging in deterrence and brinkmanship, did not lead to a confrontation between the United States and China. Instead, the U.S. competed for allies and influence in the region using a mix of offshore balancing, military investment, and support for institutions connected to LWO, like UNCLOS. This pattern of behavior suggests that interstate competition, even involving a hegemonic, is mitigated by the threat of nuclear war.

Fourth, hegemons are complacent, status quo powers who will largely behave reactively in areas of peripheral interest, but the hegemon will view the peripheral area as more vital if it perceives the rising power to be challenging the world order in that area. This trend makes sense

⁷³⁵ C.M Can and A Chan, "Preventive or Revisionist Challenge During Power Transition? The Case of China–USA Strategic Competition" *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(1) (2022): 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221076646>, 12-13.

since hegemons have many commitments and interests, and will only be able to prioritize so many of them. However, as the rising power begins to challenge the existing world order in a peripheral area, the hegemon will become more interested and involved in that region because it will see the region as an arena for great power competition. As a result, competition between the two powers in the region will eventually force the hegemon to become a more proactive player to counter the rising power's activity. Therefore, competition between a rising power and a hegemon in a peripheral region can not only make a hegemon a proactive player in a region, but this competition can also change the importance of that region to the hegemon.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

This study holds two important implications for policymakers. Each suggestion is dependent on the state of the global world order. *First, if the global order is stable, policymakers should avoid hegemonic complacency.* I found that when the international order is stable, hegemons tend to be complacent and reactive actors. They only act if a problem presents itself. However, this complacency can cause both allies and adversaries to become dissatisfied with the world order. Therefore, policymakers should not only rely on structures presented by the existing world order to incorporate rising powers, but should also actively formulate policy to prevent powers within the system from becoming dissatisfied. The most straightforward way to pursue such policies could involve preemptively providing attention and assurances to allies in peripheral regions to prevent them from turning to a rising power for support. Additionally, proactively offering an ally reasonable support creates a positive legacy that can help prevent losses of credibility in cases where the hegemon cannot provide all the assurances an ally might

want. Finally, by preemptively paying attention to potential problems, the U.S. can prevent them from escalating to the point of triggering a power transition.

An example of how complacency almost cost the United States an ally was when the Philippines nearly abandoned the U.S.-Philippine alliance during the Duterte administration. Although there were several reasons for the Philippines to make this policy choice, one driving factor was Philippine dissatisfaction with the U.S. as an ally. As Dr. Paal explained,

[The United States] didn't pay enough attention to maintaining our influence and capabilities in Southeast Asia. We did a little bit with Singapore, but that was really the Singaporeans doing it, not the US. In the Philippines we're guilty of inattention, when a little attention would have gone a long way.⁷³⁶

Future policymakers should seek to avoid making this mistake. The United States should have given the Philippines greater attention and assurances when the Liberal World Order was stable. An alternative policy the United States could have pursued instead is materially or politically supporting the Philippines specifying and delimiting its South China Sea claims to water, seabed, and non-island features through UNCLOS. According to former Assistant Secretary Sbragia, the lack of official clarity regarding the Philippine claims in the SCS puts the United States in an unclear position regarding the MDT.⁷³⁷ Therefore, the United States assisting the Philippines to delimit their claims would have ensured the U.S. could give the Philippines clear assurances about defending those claims under the MDT. This policy also would have limited the space where China could employ gray-zone strategies to assert its own unofficial claims in the SCS.

Second, if the international order is already under challenge, *policymakers should avoid becoming involved in a region just because of great power competition*. Policymakers need to be aware of how rising powers affect their perceptions of the importance of issues and regions.

⁷³⁶ Douglas Paal, interview by author, Providence (via Zoom), January 26, 2024. Transcript available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BHc-UsIULP3cjjIHIW7cEJXcv7uhiGHSgmXqZ18tiaw/edit?usp=sharing>.

⁷³⁷ Chad Sbragia, interview by author, Providence (via zoom), March 7, 2024.

Great power competition can lead the hegemon to view policy areas almost exclusively through the framework of that competition. This mindset can lead to what-aboutism and proximal issues being expanded into large conflicts. If policymakers fail to properly assess their interests and intervene in every conflict and dispute because it could be an arena for great power competition, they risk overextending the state's resources and ultimately contributing to hegemonic decline. Therefore, when deciding whether to commit resources to an area, or intervene in a conflict, policy makers need to decide specific policy goals for a region and possess clear motivations for intervening.

For example, the South China Sea is an important region, but this study shows that the United States mainly cares about the SCS in the framework of U.S.-China competition. The U.S. only began truly intervening on behalf of its allies in the region and its stated interests when it perceived China as a threat. It issued most of its policies regarding the region in response to Chinese action. Fundamentally, the U.S. does not care about who owns the underwater features in the South China Sea, but it is still involved in the disputes because it cares about its position relative to China in the region. Therefore, policymakers need to carefully examine their motivations and interests when engaging in competitive policies in the South China Sea to ensure the U.S. is not just being dragged into an area because of great power competition.

In particular, U.S. policymakers should keep this policy recommendation in mind when deciding what to do about Chinese harassment of Philippine resupply missions to the *Sierra Madre* on Second Thomas Shoal.⁷³⁸ Beginning in August 2023, the Chinese Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militia began harassing Philippine vessels heading to Second Thomas Shoal to resupply the marines stationed on the *Sierra Madre*. This harassment includes the Chinese

⁷³⁸ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Timeline of Chinese Harassment of Second Thomas Shoal Resupply Missions," *United States Naval Institute News*, April 4, 2024.

vessels using water cannons against the Philippine ships, conducting dangerous maneuvers close to the Philippine ships, and physically blocking the Philippines' ships way forward. The Chinese water cannon attacks have damaged the Philippine resupply vessels, such as shattering their windshields, and risky Chinese maneuvering has resulted in at least one collision between a Philippine vessel and a Chinese vessel.⁷³⁹ This situation is still unfolding in April 2024, and Director Sharman explained during an interview that the U.S. is likely discussing how its MDT obligations apply to this gray-zone situation in the SCS.⁷⁴⁰

Since the United States has openly stated that its MDT obligations extend to Philippine forces and materials in the South China Sea, the U.S. would face severe reputational costs for failing to intervene in this dispute if China escalated to greater use of force against the Philippines, such as using its navy to seize one of the Philippine supply ships. Therefore, given that the Liberal World Order is under challenge and the U.S. has staked its credibility on fulfilling its MDT obligations, there is a chance the U.S. will intervene. However, my policy recommendation suggests that U.S. policymakers need to carefully define U.S. interests in this dispute and clearly signal them to the Philippines and China in order to avoid falling into a larger conflict with China. For example, the United States should intervene in this issue over Second Thomas Shoal because it said it would defend the Philippines, not because it wants to challenge China. The U.S. should intervene to make sure the Philippine resupply ships reach Second Thomas Shoal safely, and should not intervene in this issue with the goal of fixing the larger South China Sea disputes or to win U.S.-China competition. This sort of deliberate, focused intervention will prevent the U.S. from overextending itself in a conflict over small, proximal

⁷³⁹ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Timeline of Chinese Harassment of Second Thomas Shoal Resupply Missions," *United States Naval Institute News*, April 4, 2024.

⁷⁴⁰ Christopher Sharman, interview by author, Providence (via phone), April 2, 2024.

issues that are actually relatively meaningless to American interests and only take on outsized symbolic importance in the framework of U.S.-China competition. The United States does not care who owns an underwater reef and its policy should reflect that interest.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study raises several questions for future research. First, I briefly examined speeches and statements made by high level officials as part of my examination of U.S. policy documents. Although I analyzed the rhetoric of the policy documents, it would be interesting to conduct textual analysis of speeches made by high-level government officials, such as U.S. presidents and cabinet officials, regarding U.S. interests in the South China Sea. Examining rhetoric would allow for a more in-depth analysis of when and how U.S. perception of China changed, and could provide more data on how the U.S. was using rhetoric to support its policies, such as through deterrent statements or invoking allies.

Second, I suggested that in peripheral areas, states can engage in brinkmanship with the brink in question being either nuclear or conventional war. I also posited that in peripheral areas like the South China Sea, conventional war might be a more effective brink than nuclear war because there is less psychological reluctance to engage in conventional war and this brink helps circumvent problems of unequal resolve between actors. These suggestions should be more rigorously tested in different cases to determine their accuracy and general applicability.

Third, this study raised questions about layers within the international order and how stability can vary across these different levels. For example, the rules-based maritime order can be under threat from China, but the liberal financial system is relatively stable. I suggest that

hegemonic stability theory can be used to explain both the stability of a particular sub-order, as well as the overarching global order. This assertion should be tested in cases outside the South China Sea to see if it is a generalizable theory, only applicable in peripheral areas, or a unique phenomenon to the South China Sea.

Fourth, U.S-China competition in the South China Sea should be examined more closely and rigorously for brinkmanship dynamics. I found the U.S. to be manipulating risk in the South China Sea and cited sources that discussed Chinese brinkmanship activity in the SCS. However, there have been no comprehensive studies on Chinese brinkmanship in the South China Sea. A study should be conducted on Chinese behavior in the South China Sea to better understand this brewing brinkmanship relationship, the Chinese perspective on U.S-China competition in the region, and Chinese resolve and commitment to protecting its interests in the South China Sea.

Finally, the framework developed over the course of this study should be tested on more cases to determine its generalizability. Currently, this framework functions by examining hegemonic behavior over time using a sequence of theories. First it examines hegemonic behavior through structural liberalism, then hegemonic order theory, and finally brinkmanship. However, it is unclear how accurately this framework would apply to other peripheral areas where the U.S. and China are competing, or to other sets of competing hegemonies and rising powers. Therefore, this framework must be rigorously tested on a variety of cases to prove its general applicability and usefulness to scholars and policymakers.

Appendix 1: Sources for Figure 4.3: Numbers of U.S. Forces Involved Annually in Exercise Balikatan and Figure 4.4: Numbers of U.S. vs. Philippine Forces Involved Annually in Exercise Balikatan

Appendix 1 displays the sources for data on the amount of forces involved in Exercise Balikatan numbered and divided by year. The sources consist of a mix of U.S. government agency press releases, scholarly sources, and media reports. There are multiple sources per year for most of the entries because I often had to use multiple sources to find data on both U.S. and Philippine forces for a year. For example, some sources only had the total number of forces, or only had the number of U.S. forces, so I had to use a different source to find the number of Philippine forces for that year. I also used multiple sources because sometimes there were inconsistencies in the number of troops involved in Exercise Balikatan for a given year. These inconsistencies were usually the result of sources reporting “approximate force numbers,” but I would then use additional sources to confirm the number of forces involved in Balikatan if I was unsure.

Year	Sources
2011	1. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/68601/exercise-balikatan-2011-begins
2012	1. https://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/593227/pacific-air-forces-command-chief-visits-philippines-for-balikatan-2012/ ; 2. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/86830/balikatan-2012-officially-opens ; 3. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/87774/philippines-us-conclude-balikatan ; 4. https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/balikatan-2012-focuses-humanitarian-and-disaster-response#:~:text=April%2016%20(PIA)%20%2D%2D%20The,the%20Balikatan%202012%20(BK12)
2013	1. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/105379/balikatan-2013-comes-end ; 2. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/105379/balikatan-2013-comes-end 3. https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/532078/balikatan-exercise-demonstrates-commitment/#:~:text=Senior%20leaders%20with%20the%20Armed,who%20participated%20in%20the%20exercise 4. https://www.rappler.com/nation/25583-us-ph-launch-balikatan-amid-china-row
2014	1. https://amti.csis.org/u-s-philippines-balikatan-exercise-in-the-face-of-chinese-island-building/#:~:text=Balikatan%202015%20is%20the%2031,Philippine%2DU.S.%20Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty ; 2. https://www.okinawa.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/504735/balikatan-2014-comes-to-a-close/
2015	1. https://amti.csis.org/u-s-philippines-balikatan-exercise-in-the-face-of-chinese-island-building/#:~:text=Balikatan%202015%20is%20the%2031,Philippine%2DU.S.%20Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty ; 2. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/Article/585545/31st-iteration-of-balikatan-kicks-off/
2016	1. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/715540/philippines-us-start-exercise-balikatan-2016/ ; 2. https://amti.csis.org/balikatan-exercise-highlights-territorial-defense-multilateral-approach/

2017	1. https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-36-balikatan-exercises-2018-philippines-us-security-cooperation-forging-ahead/; 2. https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1178043/philippines-us-begin-balikatan-2017-with-opening-ceremony/; https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1032632 3. https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3006271/us-philippine-balikatan-military-exercises-south-china-sea
2018	1. https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-does-a-bigger-2018-balikatan-military-exercise-say-about-us-philippines-alliance-under-duterte/#:~:text=Vidallon%2C%20the%20Balikatan%20Combined%20Joint,troops%20from%20the%20U.S.%20side.; https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-36-balikatan-exercises-2018-philippines-us-security-cooperation-forging-ahead/ 2. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2018-05-08/adf-trains-military-partners-exercise-balikatan-2018/; 3. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1500010/balikatan-34-2018/#:~:text=Balikatan%2034%2D2018%20is%20an,U.S.%20and%20Philippine%20armed%20forces
2019	1. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1813587/armed-forces-of-the-philippines-us-forces-conclude-annual-balikatan-exercise/; 2. https://amti.csis.org/balikatan-2019-and-the-crisis-in-philippine-china-rapprochement/; 3. https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/11/us-filipino-and-aussie-forces-conduct-premier-military-exercise-but-dont-mention-china/
2020	1. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2127794/us-indo-pacific-command-cancels-balikatan-2020/, 2. https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-us-kick-off-large-scale-balikatan-military-exercise/ 3. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2127794/us-indo-pacific-command-cancels-balikatan-2020/
2021	1. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2584210/us-and-philippine-forces-conclude-36th-balikatan-exercise/
2022	1. https://ph.usembassy.gov/37th-iteration-of-balikatan-exercise-set-to-begin-in-the-philippines/ 2. https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-philippine-forces-successfully-conclude-37th-balikatan 3. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2974746/37th-iteration-of-balikatan-exercise-set-to-begin-in-the-philippines/ 4. https://www.reuters.com/world/philippines-us-hold-biggest-military-exercises-seven-years-2022-03 5. https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-us-kick-off-large-scale-balikatan-military-exercise/ 6. https://apnews.com/article/china-taiwan-philippines-manila-armed-forces-f985b504e922d2db06e124e9a4578d26
2023	1. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/442360/philippines-united-states-officially-kick-off-largest-balikatan-date; https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Videos/video/881495/ ; 2. https://ph.usembassy.gov/philippine-u-s-troops-to-hold-largest-ever-balikatan-exercise-from-april-11-to-28/ ; 3. https://news.usni.org/2023/04/11/u-s-philippines-kick-off-largest-ever-balikatan-exercise-as-defense-foreign-affairs-leaders-meet-in-washington; 4. https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/04/kill-chain-tested-at-first-ever-balikatan-sinkex/; 5. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2023-04-28/australia-supports-cornerstone-exercise-philippines 6. https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2003209165/

Appendix 2: Sources for Figure 4.5: Number of Countries Participating in MTA Sama Sama

Appendix 2 displays the sources for data on the number of countries involved in MTA Sama Sama numbered and divided by year. The sources consist of a mix of U.S. government agency press releases, scholarly sources, and media reports. There are multiple sources per year for most of the entries because sometimes the source was unclear about which countries participated. I would use multiple sources to confirm the countries who participated in MTA Sama Sama in a given year.

Year	Sources
2017	1. https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1219401/us-and-philippine-naval-force-s-enhance-cooperation-strengthen-alliance-during-m/
2018	1. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1569455/us-philippines-strengthen-alliance-with-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/ ; 2. https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1577570/us-philippines-conclude-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama-2018/
2019	1. https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-philippines-and-japan-conclude-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/ ; 2. https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1988338/us-philippines-japan-kick-off-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/ ; https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1993414/us-philippines-japan-conclude-maritime-training-activity-sama-sama/
2020	No Sources (exercise canceled due to COVID-19 Pandemic)
2021	1. https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/2808120/philippine-us-exercise-mta-sama-sama-kicks-off-with-japan-france/
2022	1. https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3193619/multilateral-exercise-sama-sama-lumbas-2022-concludes/#:~:text=Combined%20Philippine%20U.S.%20and%20Philippine,Philippines%20and%20the%20Sulu%20Sea 2. https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3188035/combined-philippine-us-and-philippine-australian-exercise-sama-sama-lumbas-kick/ ; 3. https://news.usni.org/2022/10/21/u-s-and-japan-prepare-for-joint-exercise-u-s-wraps-up-drills-with-allies-in-south-china-sea
2023	1. https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1210922 2. https://www.defensenews.com/training-sim/2023/10/18/us-philippines-wrap-up-naval-drill-amid-clashes-in-south-china-sea/ ; 3. https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/10/philippines-u-s-hold-annual-sama-sama-exercise/ 4. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3545630/us-philippines-partner-with-allies-during-exercise-sama-sama-2023/ 5. https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/03/asia/us-philippines-naval-exercise-sama-sama-intl-hnk-ml/index.html 6. https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3545300/us-philippines-partner-with-allies-during-exercise-sama-sama-2023/

Appendix 3: Interview Questions Lists

These interviews were conducted via zoom, phone, and email correspondence. The interviews lasted on average from forty minutes to an hour. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed to generate citable transcripts. These transcripts are not word for word recreations of the interviews, as I edited them for grammar and clarity. The transcripts were also often edited by interviewees when I sent them the transcripts for approval. These interviews contained open ended questions that allowed me to probe into interviewee answers. The follow-up and clarifying questions I asked as part of these interviews are not recorded in this appendix as they were specific to each interview. The transcripts for each interview are attached in the footnotes.

Interview Questions I: Used for Interviews with U.S-China Relations Experts

Introduction:

Please introduce yourself and your background/connection with U.S.-China relations

Policy Questions:

1. Do you think the rise of China indicates shifts in the global world order?
2. How has U.S. policy towards China changed over the last twenty years?
3. What are the United States' primary goals and interests when it comes to U.S.-China relations? Have those interests changed over time? And if so, how? why?
4. What are the main causes of U.S-China competition?
5. How does U.S-China competition influence and change U.S. policy and behavior in peripheral areas like the South China Sea?
6. What would you say is the U.S.'s current policy/strategy vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea?
7. How have interactions between the United States and China in the South China Sea changed over the last twenty years?

Theory Questions:

1. Do you consider yourself a realist, liberal, or constructivist?
2. Do you think the United States is a global hegemon? Why?
3. Do you think the United States' position/former position as hegemon influences its policy towards China? If so, how?
4. Do you think the U.S's current policy in the South China Sea follows realism, liberalism, or constructivism? A mix? None? Has this overarching paradigm changed over the last twenty years?

Policy Recommendations:

How should the U.S. approach the issue of China in areas like the South China Sea moving forward (for example, should the U.S. escalate its presence in peripheral areas like the South China Sea, retrench, balance against China with its allies, etc.)?

Interview Questions II: Used for Interviews with South China Sea Experts

Introduction:

Please introduce yourself (name, connection/experience with the South China Sea)

Policy Questions:

1. What are the United States' interests in the South China Sea? Have those interests changed over the past twenty years? Why?
2. Does the United States have a single overarching policy regarding the South China Sea?
3. Has the United States' South China Sea policy and behavior in the South China Sea changed over time?
4. What role does U.S-China competition play in U.S. policy and behavior in peripheral areas like the South China Sea?
5. Inversely, what role do peripheral areas like the South China Sea play in U.S-China competition?
6. Has the United States' policy/policies towards the South China Sea been effective? Why and in what ways? In what ways has it failed?

Policy Recommendations:

How should the U.S. approach the South China Sea moving forward (for example, should the U.S. escalate its presence in peripheral areas like the South China Sea, retrench, balance against China with its allies, etc.)?

Interview Questions III: Used for Interviews with South China Sea Experts

Introduction:

Please introduce yourself and your background/connection with U.S.-China relations

Policy Questions:

1. Do you think the rise of China indicates shifts in the global world order?
2. What are the United States' interests in East Asia? In Southeast Asia?
3. What are the main causes of U.S-China competition?
4. How has U.S-China competition affected U.S. alliances in Southeast Asia?
5. How has U.S-China competition affected the security environment in East and Southeast Asia? Has it increased conflict?
6. How does U.S-China competition influence and change U.S. policy and behavior in peripheral areas like the South China Sea?
7. Has U.S. involvement changed the nature of the South China Sea disputes? (ex. Has it empowered the other South China Sea claimants against China? Has it made China more assertive in its claims and less willing to negotiate?)
8. What would you say is the U.S.'s current policy/strategy vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea? Is this policy effective?

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