The Hegemony’s Contest in the South China Sea

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Abstract

Constantly analyzed in scientific, theoretical, and empirical studies, the “Asian Mediterranean” region has received renewed attention as a consequence of the rise of China. China’s emergence combines its strong economic dynamic with increased confidence, positioning it as a potential regional hegemony. On that conceptual basis, this study aims to answer whether a power transition has already occurred in the South China Sea and how the process of a regional hegemonic transition took place. Through an examination of the instruments used by the United States and China to exercise power, articulated with the power transition theory, it establishes that a transition in the South China Sea dispute could have already occurred. However, the study disclaims that Beijing’s evolution and sudden change of behavior aim to overthrow the U.S. global leadership but rather intends to reclaim its position of regional hegemony.

Keywords

regional hegemony, regional conflict, regional contest, power transition theory, the South China Sea

Following the collapse of the URSS, there was a transformation in the international system, which went from a bipolar to a unipolar moment dominated by the United States. Scholars and analysts have engaged in a lively debate about the long-term durability of the United States’ hegemony, or whether it was simply a temporary phenomenon (Goh, 2019). During the 1990s, American technological, economic, and military superiority was unmatched, and many believed it would take a long time before the United States’ global leadership would be challenged (Wohlforth, 1999). However, emerging shreds of evidence show that this was not the case and that Krauthammer’s (1990) arguments were correct—the era of North American hegemony is coming to an end, largely as a result of China’s rise (Layne, 2006, 2012, 2018). Whether China’s ascension remains peaceful is unclear, but there is likely to be a power transition because the desire for survival and freedom will prevail, leading states to unite (or not) momentarily to avoid a potential hegemony (Jervis, 1992). As China continues to rise toward a major superpower, it challenges the United States’ hegemony, especially in Asia (Mearsheimer, 2010). In particular, the attitude and aspirations of Beijing in the Southeast Asia region, including the South China Sea (SCS), were deeply analyzed to identify the direction of its future behavior at a global level (Johnston, 2019). This strategic probability comprises China’s growing competitiveness with the United States for global preponderance and its political rhetoric for a peaceful solution articulated with claimant members of the SCS, based on a code of conduct (Buszynski, 2019).

There is a vast and long literary debate regarding the SCS and the contest between the United States and China for regional dominance. Carter (2018) stated that the United States persist in complaining of several violations of China, while Feng and He (2018) noted that the United States used the terms “assertiveness,” “militarization,” and in some cases as “bullying” to describe China’s behavior in the area. According to T. Fravel (2016), the United States alleges that China has carried out a militarization of the SCS, deploying jet fighters and missiles to show its control of the SCS. Consequently, the United States is accused by China and other Asian countries of militarizing the region, with their effort to intimidate China by demonstrating their power (M. T. Fravel, 2017). Compared to China, the United States has strategic military bases in allied countries such as Thailand and the Philippines (Morton, 2016). Although, one cannot deny the significant reinforcement that its military forces obtained in recent years, either by increasing their fleet, air activities, navy exercises, or the continued intimidating presence to project its power and challenge China’s judicial and territorial claims (Pei, 2018; Roberts, 2018). As a result, China perceives the U.S. actions as a military

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identity and oppressive diplomacy. Consequently, Beijing is exerting some apprehension with U.S. intelligence exercises off its coast. China assumes that they are an intimidation and military air occupation by the United States and that these exercises and investigations increase their insecurity (Kaplan, 2011). Correspondingly, both powers describe their actions as strictly defensive (Scobell, 2018).

Quintessentially, the United States has expressed its intentions to implement a medium-range missile system in Asia as soon as it decides where, and who accepts such a system in its territory (Shi, 2017). Washington justifies that it is a response to the aggressive deployment of Chinese ground missiles in the SCS, which threatens the security of its fleet (Tan, 2018). Conversely, Beijing claims that the missile system has a defensive character in response to the threatening American presence in the region (Zhao, 2017). Certainly, defensive systems and weapons have offensive characteristics—it depends on their practical use. In this sense, as states can never be sure of their adversaries’ intentions, it is natural for the United States to be concerned about the missile system in the SCS (Zhang, 2018).

In this peculiar and narrative way, both powers use each other’s practices as a justifying factor in the exercise of their functions. However, the exercise of legitimate military prevention has a coercive feature, but limited, so as not to directly threaten the opponent (Zhang, 2018). However, this is a self-limitation by states to prevent competition from turning into armed conflict (Zhang, 2018; Zhao, 2017). While the aforementioned scholars have referred to China as the rising challenger to U.S. hegemony, an in-depth analysis of the link between the SCS dispute and Beijing’s ambition to supplant American supremacy needs to be done. More specifically, it is important to examine the Chinese and American positions to determine whether a power transition has already occurred in the SCS and if a subsequent process of regional hegemonic transition is underway or has already occurred.

To address these gaps, the research focuses on American interests in the SCS in a perspective of understanding Washington’s participation in the dispute over the SCS, and a deep analysis of the dynamic elements that led to Beijing’s growing challenge to American hegemony in Southeast Asia. Using a predictive framework, power transition theory (PTT), hegemonic concepts, and assumptions, the article predicts the likely turn of events in the SCS tussle. The study’s main questions include: (a) Is the rise of China challenging U.S. hegemony in the SCS? (b) Is power transition likely to occur as China challenges the United States in the SCS? and (c) What are the future implications of the regional contested?

The study first considers the theoretical foundation of hegemonies and power transitions. Subsequently, the research scrutinizes the factors that drove China to challenge the United States in the SCS and the importance of this region. It then considers China’s domestic politics and examines the regional order’s hegemony contest, particularly the American response strategies to the increasing Chinese assertiveness in the SCS. Subsequently, a detailed analysis is presented on whether China is replacing the United States regionally and consequently in the SCS. Ultimately, a conclusion will deliver a summary of the entire study, including the conflict’s future.

Theoretical Foundations

In analyzing China’s rising challenge of America’s dominance in the SCS, the study deploys the PTT. First, we examine the Hegemonic Stability Theory, and then compare it with PTT. A hegemony is described as an actor’s capacity to shape aspects of an international system using coercive and noncoercive approaches (Norrlof, 2015). It can include leadership, prevalence, and predominance, particularly in terms of a state’s legitimacy of authority over an international organization of states, that is, a systematic hierarchy of states. From this definition, hegemony encompasses overwhelming power or abilities and the capacity to exercise leadership (Gramsci, 1971; Schmidt, 2018). In addition, it entails being considered the most powerful entity, able to control other states. In international relations theory, hegemony depicts (a) exceptional material imbalance in favor of one country, (b) incomparable military capabilities to regularly contain other potential challengers on the global stage, (c) a massive capacity of controlling the market dynamics, the capital, and raw materials—structural power (Strange, 1987), (d) having a competitive advantage in producing value-added commodities, (e) generating accepted ideology, and (f) functionally differentiated from other nations within a global system and expected to offer particular advantages, like financial stability, security, and commercial capabilities (Norrlof & Wohlfarth, 2019; Schenoni, 2017).

In international relations, hegemonic stability theory (HST) is deeply rooted in political science. It claims that an international system increases the chances of stability when a single state is a hegemony or a dominant global power (J. S. Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2010). Hence, the fall of an existing hegemony produces two outcomes: first, a rising state will fill the power vacuum, and second, it will reduce a global system’s stability. Through the preponderance of state power, it can choose to apply its exercise of power into persuasion, diplomacy, or coercion (Mearsheimer, 2016). This is known as hegemony and entails a nation’s capability to single-handedly dominate global political and economic arrangements and rules (J. S. Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2010). HST is a great help in analyzing the growth of great superpowers that assume hegemonic roles or become global leaders. In addition, the theory can be deployed to examine, calculate, and predict the future of global politics by deliberating on the symbiotic relationship of a rising challenger or successor and a declining hegemony (Herrington, 2011; Saull, 2017).
For a nation-state to ascend to a hegemony (Great Superpower), it needs to dominate the world system and have superiority in all components of power—geopolitical, technological, economic, and military (Gilpin, 1981; Wohlforth, 1999). Moreover, these elements must have a logistic platform based on excellent power mobility (Fox, 1946, 1980). This aspect is essential to enable a state to forge its influence through a rule-based global order (Ikenberry, 2004). In addition, a vast territory is also crucial to provide more influence, leadership, and collective goods (Mansfield, 1993).

Regarding military force, it is not enough to have a defensive army—it is of vital importance to have a superior air force or navy with the capacity to reach any corner of the globe within seconds (Mearsheimer, 2016). This is why “hegemonies” are strategically positioned on islands or peninsulas (such as the case of the SCS). Islands, seas, or peninsulas offer additional security, but in some instances, hegemonies are neither peninsular nor insular (Chomsky, 2004). For instance, America has become a virtual island with robust seaboards, and some of the claimant states in the SCS are America’s allies. Furthermore, nuclear weaponry coupled with a vital air force can offer highly reliable security to a nation and set it above other nations (Norrof & Wohlforth, 2019).

Hegemonies need to have massive and expanding economies whereby unparalleled supremacy in technological and financial sectors is essential. Economy and military capabilities enable a nation to enforce rules in an international system (Keohane, 1984, 2019). Also, a hegemony needs to have a strong drive to lead, the determination to establish a hegemonic regime, the ability to lead and force others to obey economic regulations (Strange, 1987; Wyatt-Walter, 1996). The major challenge facing hegemonies is how to remain one (Jervis, 2009; Keohane & Nye, 1977; Webb & Krasner, 1989). In an international system, power distribution is always changing because other states’ power rapidly grows relative to the hegemony. When faced with such challenges, a hegemony needs to constantly assess the power ratios and determine how to preserve its dominant position (Chomsky, 2004). Unless this occurs, a transition of power is the likely outcome.

Abramo Organski (1960) noted that national power is defined by the population and its effectiveness in economic and political development. However, these areas are subject to changes in power distribution and result in power transitions. Furthermore, when the determinant elements of power in the units (states) of the system, such as technology, economics, manufacturing, political organization, and change, we face international instability (Organski, 1960). The current instability and competition in the international order occur because we live in a period in which the power components are shifting rapidly (Organski, 1960). Thus, in the international system, we are confronted with a unity growing in the essential components of power, and on the contrary, the hegemonic unity trying not to lose its position in the systemic structure, resulting in competition in all orders and domains in the interactions of units (Johnston, 2019; Waltz, 1979).

The PTT is a structural and dynamic approach to international politics and power shifts (Lim, 2015). While the theory has retained its core ideologies, it has acquired new dimensions over the decades. As a predictive theory, PTT has demonstrated valuable features in prognosticating collaboration and conflict at international, regional, and national levels (Gries & Jing, 2019). While PTT has been associated with the (Neo) Realism school due to its focus on power politics, it differs in the dynamic description of the international system. Conversely, realism stresses systemic anarchy, adding that it is the most stable system. According to Waltz (1979), “To say that an international-political system is stable means two things: first, that it remains anarchic; second, that no consequential variation takes place in the number of principal parties that constitute the system” (p. 162). In contrast, PTT envisions politics as a hierarchy system with different elements of collaboration and competition (A. Goldstein, 2007). PTT logic and underpinnings have influenced several theoretical premises, such as hegemonic propositions, liberal arguments concerning declining hegemonies, soft power and status quo arguments, and, most recently, the simplified and more deterministic arguments about a potential Thucydides Trap as China surpasses America (Allison, 2017).

PTT analyzes the patterns of evolving power relationships and offers a probabilistic tool by which international realists (IR) scholars can measure structural changes and predict collaborative reforms or antagonistic strategies that could influence the preservation of peace (Lim, 2015). PTT is founded on empirically tested assumptions supported by big data sets, but it also has an intuitive element, which maximizes its use in interpreting present-data occurrences. This is especially the case of China’s rise to prominence, which, unless managed, will induce severe resultantst in global politics (Waltz, 1979, pp. 103–130). PTT perceives international politics to be integrated vertically and horizontally; even distribution of military, political, and economic capabilities between contending nations or groups can escalate the likelihood of war, but peace will be preserved best if states (both advantaged and disadvantaged) experience imbalance in their national capabilities (Regilme & Hartmann, 2019).

PTT argues that an aggressor emerges from a small group of strong dissatisfied countries and that it is the weaker nations that are most likely to be the aggressors (Rauch, 2016). PTT comprises dynamic and structural forms. Structurally, the theory envisions international politics as a hierarchy of nations with different collaborations and competition (Chan, 2007). The theory specifies the relative roles of countries in this hierarchically articulated system under norms and rules in the sense of identifying how nations try to dominate international politics. The nature of structure and
rules is altered by growth probabilities, predicting how and why changes occur in the international system (Chan, 2004).

The major components of PTT include satisfaction, hierarchy, and power, and these variables connect the structural picture with the likelihood of a severe conflict. The theory holds that administrative relations among countries are centered on different commitments by national elites to the existing status quo, including a broader acceptance of Liberal Internationalism (Booth, 2010). This affects the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of a nation with its systemic status and position.

Naturally, superpowers demonstrate higher levels of dominance worldwide or regional. PTT establishes the systemic hegemony as the powerful actor or predominant state. In short, the theory asserts that the hegemonic state controls the international system, articulating its structural power with the incomparable military, economic, and technological capabilities legitimized by the allied countries. Nevertheless, hegemonic stability is not synonymous with perpetual because the constant in the system is change. The exercise of power between states leads to the growth of potential actors who are unhappy with the system and challenge the status quo.

**American Policy and Interests in the SCS**

The disputes in the SCS, which involve China and its neighbors, seem at first glance like disagreements between faraway nations with little significance for the United States. However, this country has several interests (political, strategic, and economic) that give it good reasons to engage in the SCS tussle (McDevitt, 2014). America has made official public statements (at the Congressional level) about its official SCS policy. But no claimant should use coercion or force to resolve sovereignty issues or alter the status-quo in the SCS conflict. Furthermore, the United States claims that FONOPs should be safeguarded, including unhindered lawful movements for military, commercial, and private vessels. Furthermore, the coastal states ought to respect the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas) (United Nations, 1982), which includes peaceful military missions in the EEZ coastal states (McDevitt, 2014). Another official position of the United States regarding the SCS is that all maritime entitlements of the SCS must rely on international law and originate from land characteristics of the SCS.

Washington believes that China’s claims do not meet such requirements and only the land (rocks and islands) produce maritime zones. America does not take a stand on sovereignty claims, nor does it choose sides or favor any nation’s claim over the other (McDevitt, 2014). Although, the United States supports an adequate code of conduct based on a rule’s framework to guide and regulate nations’ behaviors in the SCS. This includes norms and contingency schemes to prevent conflicts in unstable regions and manage them when such incidents occur, thus curbing any conflict escalation (US Department of the State, 2019). Furthermore, America acknowledges the use of globally recognized dispute resolution mechanisms. The U.S. strategy toward SCS clearly affirms its support for the coastal countries, some of its allies, stating that it will take the necessary actions for their protection and even provide the means to increase their capacities (Pompeo, 2020). Moreover, America intends to enhance access for its military in areas close to the SCS.

The Secretary of the State, Michael Pompeo, has further articulated Washington’s position, arguing that China cannot lawfully assert its claims on the SCS, including any EEZ deriving from the Scarborough Reef and the Spratly Islands. China’s harassment of the Philippine fishing boats and offshore energy development is unlawful because their unilateral actions intended to exploit resources (Pompeo, 2020). Washington argued that Beijing could not lawfully and coherently put forward a claim in the SCS, and America rejects any claims made beyond a distance of 12-nautical miles (Poling, 2020). The rulings reached by the Arbitration Tribunal are final and legally binding for America and China (Pompeo, 2020). Therefore, America does not want China to treat the SCS as its maritime empire.

The official statements of America regarding the SCS reflect its interests in the SCS. Marvin Ott (2019), a senior analyst at the CIA, classifies these interests into global economic influence, power balance, and defense ties with allies. According to the present-day interests of the United States in the SCS precede President Biden by over 200 years, and Washington is determined to ensure the freedom of that region in the future. Furthermore, the United States seeks to maintain order and security while upholding the liberty of the SCS in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the law of the sea while also ensuring unrestrained commerce (Poling, 2020). The sea-lanes passing through the SCS are considered the busiest and most strategic to America’s maritime waterways. In 2016, the SCS sea-lanes carried a third of worldwide shipping (approximately $3.4 trillion). This represents 6% of America’s total trade. Moreover, the same sea-lanes are an increasingly important military artery since America’s Seventh Fleet frequently travels between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

In the SCS region, the United States has treaties with allies such as Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines (Rowan, 2005). America has also affirmed that it has some obligation for the Taiwanese defense and has established close ties with New Zealand and Singapore. In addition, security collaboration treaties have been signed with Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Ott, 2019). Therefore, the SCS has offered America the opportunity to build and maintain a strong security network in Southeast and East Asia, sustained through frequent contacts with the Seventh Fleet, as it moves through the SCS region.
Another valuable asset of the SCS involves preserving regional order backed by the United States, exemplifying specific fundamental political ideologies—regarding international law, preserving the sovereignty of states, rejecting any territorial enlargement, and unconditional acceptance of the shipping lanes as a common worldwide right (Ott, 2019). The United States also intends to advance conservation efforts, including protecting marine territory against despoilment. The concept of ensuring regional order is connected to a wider set of interests, institutions, and principles embodied in the post-Second World War global system, demonstrating that American values and leadership are based on North Americans’ interests (Ott, 2019). Furthermore, the SCS borders other nations in South East Asia that are current or potential partners of the United States, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore (Acharya, 2013). In a context of conflict with the United States, China would use its bases in the SCS to constitute a military tactical structure with anti-access capacities meant to keep U.S. forces outside the first island chain (Morton, 2016).

However, I believe that permanent geographic power in the SCS is the driving force of U.S. interest in the region. Whoever dominates the SCS will have permanent geographic power at their disposal. In 1942, Nicholas Spykman stressed that geography is the vital element in any state’s foreign policy, as it is the most permanent. He referred to the SCS as the “Asian Mediterranean” and argued that it was of such high importance as the Caribbean was in the 19th century for the United States (Spykman, 1942; Spykman et al., 1944). The United States knows the importance of dominance over the American continent in its escalation to superpower because that was how it imposed itself and ended the European hegemony in the American continent. In this sense, the United States cannot allow China to have the same objective and achieve the same ends as the Monroe doctrine.

As noted previously, according to Gramsci’s thesis, the United States has to contain China’s ambitions to preserve its position; if, and I highlight “if” there is no containment, we are likely to witness a gradual transition of power in the region. Thus, the United States’ strategic principle, whether it is injecting weakness (Art, 2003), delaying China development (Friedberg, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2001), preventing the creation of a global center of power (Chomsky, 2004), or being part of a revisionist policy to change the world to its image (Gilpin, 1981; Jervis, 2009; Waltz, 1979), the outcome of the United States’ revisionist policy is to prevent a regional power transition process.

In this sense, it should be emphasized that the greatest risk of the SCS dispute lies in the containment policy’s failure; if the United States is not successful, we will witness an immediate power transition, increasing the danger of falling into a Thucydides trap. Therefore, the United States not only has to impose a strategy to preserve its position, but it also has to succeed.

Why and How China Challenges the American Dominance in the SCS

The SCS presents a series of benefits and challenges; on one hand, it is a deposit of natural energy and fishing reserves, with an imperative variant regarding the national rights of regional actors, but it also encompasses characteristics of interest on a global scale (Sen, 2018). At the heart of this imperative variant is the maritime trade volume covering a third of global trade (Raine, 2017). On the other hand, its wealth in natural resources, allied to the variant of national sovereignty, leads to intense territorial claims that overlap other claims, resulting in an authentic challenge in the sphere of international law. Through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese claim includes the islands of Nansha and Zhongsha known as the Spratly Islands; Xisha islands, known as Paracel Islands; Dongsha Islands, known as the Silver Islands, and claims the corresponding exclusive economic zone. For this purpose, China determines the claims in historical rights and geographically represented on a map from the 1940s.

In Southeast Asia, the sea is the main method for transportation and communication, and more frequently, regional hinterlands are beyond the jurisdiction of the authorities (Wong, 2018). Therefore, the waterways appear as the most efficient route to get around and accomplish objectives. Also, protecting trade through patrolling and military dominance over the sea lanes would be advantageous to attained prosperity and confidence. China’s territorial claims are found on an enigmatic map from the 1940s, identified as the nine-dash line, which incorporates 90% of the SCS (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). Unsurprisingly, opposition from coastal countries increases instability, largely derived from China’s assertive implementation in 2013 (Swaine, 2016). The most disputed area is at the heart of the SCS, claimed by Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan, although the latter’s claims reflect the claims of Beijing (Cai, 2017).

In addition, the energy factor hosts Oil and Gas reserves to support the Chinese industrial machinery for several decades. As a result, approximately 3,200 acres were reclaimed from various Spratly Isles reefs in 2016 (Levy & Thompson, 2010). Correspondingly, regional instability has increased, giving rise to intense negotiations between Washington and Beijing (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). However, without relevant impediments, China proceeded with the construction of military installations in claimed territories (Scobell, 2018). It is some time that China installed military extensive missile systems, navy ports, and landing tracks, and on the SCS. The accurate details are not yet known with certainty, but it is assumed that at this time, the SCS hosts advanced military posts, with sophisticated offensive and defensive military systems, with missiles, radars, runways, and deep-water seaports (Teo, 2018; Wong, 2018). According to Zhao (2017), each of the smaller islands holds radar, missiles, and supply structures, including military shelters; in
sum, these islands operate as aircraft carriers, projecting and expanding China’s exercise of power over the region.

According to Swaine (2016), China’s Coast Guard and maritime militia pressure the region through commercial and fishing vessels to intimidate other vessels. However, Beijing has never assumed and denied any such intervention. Whatever the intention, the truth is that countries that claim the same area feel intimidated to the point of restricting their maritime access. The change in attitude, more confident and assertive on the part of Beijing, raises concerns for all powers, particularly for regional powers, which can be directly affected if routes are unreliable. For South Korea and Japan, the SCS dispute carries a huge burden on geopolitical security due to their greater reliance on maritime routes (Rowan, 2005). Consequently, it is perfectly acceptable for insecure powers to become more active in securing their national interests. The arrival of Japan in the geostrategic and geopolitical game in Southeast Asia definitely puts pressure and raises serious complications for Chinese claims in SCS.

However, Beijing’s intentions concerning the SCS are clear, namely in the Paracel Islands, disputed by Vietnam and Taiwan, largely because the chain of reefs forms a defensive barrier to the island of Hainan, which sustains the fleet of nuclear submarines (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). Essentially, Hainan Island is controlled by Beijing, and if Beijing dominates the Paracel Islands, it will enjoy the ability to cripple Vietnam as the Anamita Mountains that divide the country, become an easy target (Morton, 2016). Vietnam historically challenged China’s quest for regional hegemony, and in the Spratlys, it occupies most (around 25) of the islands. However, China has controlled the Paracel Islands since 1974 (Bader et al., 2014). Moreover, the biggest Chinese military base is located in the Paracels, on Woody Island, where 1,400 military personnel operate radar facilities such as SAM batteries and airfields (M. T. Fravel, 2017).

Moreover, China centralizes the exercise of the entire administration of its claims in the Yongxing Island, acting as its geostrategic and geopolitical hub (M. T. Fravel, 2017). To achieve legitimacy for its claim, China operates civil and tourist activities with daily flights (M. T. Fravel, 2017). The strategy results in establishing Chinese economic, cultural, and political structures; the goal is to get an exclusive economic zone around Yongxing Island (Feng & He, 2018). Another source of instability is located in Scarborough Shoal, an administrative part of the Philippines, which since 2012 has been under Chinese rule. The chain of rocks and reefs became the motives for arguments between the parties, largely due to the silent and nonintervention strategy of the United States, despite the defense treaty between Manila and Washington (Carter, 2018). However, the Obama administration chose to reprimand verbally (Cai, 2017).

Since then, disagreements between Manila and Washington have intensified, and China has taken the opportunity to establish a new agreement. The geo-economic agreement allows China to achieve its objectives in obtaining resources; in return, China develops infrastructure investments. However, note that China chose not to develop any military infrastructure at Scarborough Shoal due to its proximity to the Philippine continental territory (Buszynski, 2019). This would cause a setback in relations and direct Manila toward the United States (Haugland et al., 2018). Beijing’s national interest in the Scarborough Shoal is based on ensuring the security and control of access to the Pacific Ocean. Identified as imperative by China, access, and control reduces its vulnerabilities. In other words, China tries to impose a defensive line far from its coast, thus increasing its protection and military prevention in future conflicts (Swaine, 2016).

Through the map drawn by China, one can see the strategic importance of the chain of islands, and the Philippines as an easy target for a powerful China, it easily reached a political agreement (Zhao, 2017). However, according to Rolf and Agnew (2016), China’s strategy involves subtly directing the political dynamics of Manila and ensuring control of access to the Pacific. In addition, even after the trade agreement, there is no guarantee that it will be permanent and that the Philippines will give up on its claims. It is recalled that the Philippines presented its claim to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2016, the legitimate institution to adjudicate disputes between actors on the global stage and that the Philippines won (Zhao, 2017).

However, under Article 121 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, an island is a natural area surrounded by water and sustaining human life. In this sense, Beijing asserts its claim to Yongxing Island, presenting the social and economic dynamics as proof of its human sustainability (Scobell, 2018). However, as the islands’ sustainability was supported by air or sea supply rather than self-support, the court ruled that the Chinese claims did not meet legal requirements (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). Furthermore, the court ruled that the islands are mere rocks with very low ground elevations, which represent different rights for not being considered an island. As a result of not being an island, the 370 km of exclusive economic zone, which the legitimate state controls, does not apply (Wong, 2018). This decision remains in effect; nevertheless, China does not recognize the court’s legitimacy and decides to identify the territorial sea of 22 km, adding the corresponding exclusive economic zone (Zhao, 2017).

For the United States, freedom of navigation and maritime rights is vital, as it is through its navy, it projects its world power and stability. In this sense, it exercises its protection through FONOPS: military exercises to combat excessive maritime claims. Given that 70% of Chinese trade passes through the sea, particularly through SCS, the United States can, with a simple exercise, block and enforce its rules on China’s maritime trade (Beckley, 2017). The consequences would be disastrous, with a possible shutdown of its economy and would inevitably harm the world.
economy, including the United States (Feng & He, 2018; M. T. Fravel, 2017). However, the threat exists, mainly through the FONOPs, as it is through them that the geopolitical and geostrategic balance is established (Feng & He, 2018). Despite the existence of the innocent passage of warships in territorial waters, the law of the sea does not allow any military exercises to be carried out, including research activities, without authorization (T. Fravel, 2016). The law also determines that ships need to be always on the move, taking into account that it must be a quick passage (Carter, 2018). However, the American fleet exercises an irregular navigation in the form of a zigzag, transmitting the message that they do not recognize the Chinese territorial legitimacy in the SCS waters (Haugland et al., 2018). Correspondingly, the U.S. Navy is under Chinese military surveillance and pressure to abandon its exclusive zone and comply with the sea law.

These powers in a clash demonstrate certain ironic and political inconsistencies from both countries. On one hand, China, a signatory to the Convention for the Law of the Sea, does not recognize its legitimacy to judge, and as a result, it violates the Convention’s decisions. On the other hand, America, which is not a signatory to the Convention, seeks to exert pressure for everyone to comply with international law (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). According to Teixeira and Pavia (2021, p. 73), both powers demonstrate a rejection of international law, noting that

Recent face-offs between the US and China in the international waters have been shown to disregard the military powers’ part for international laws. The tendency is common to both nations. While the US starts such actions, other nations generally follow in such infringement’s activities.

In this sense, it is logical to exercise power from China in SCS, a military and assertive dynamic of expanding and defending its national interests. Meanwhile, the United States seeks to exercise a containment strategy based on two pillars to preserve the status quo. As Teixeira (2019) notes, “Geopolitically, containing China reduces her to the status of a regional power. Geo-strategically, containing China ensures the continuing dominance of the American hegemony” (p. 174). Although, the technological development in China’s military industry allows it to increase its ability to retaliate against the United States (Wong, 2018). As a result, American strategy accelerated and expanded its containment efforts to other areas, such as the trade war and increased military power in the area (Zhao, 2017).

In short, despite the risks and several historical examples, both powers are navigating the Thucydides trap, with the United States assuming the role of Sparta in seeking to maintain its dominance, and China identifying with the enriched and developed Athens, challenging the status quo (Morton, 2016). Thus, the solution involves a strategic reset diplomatically articulated by both superpowers.

**Domestic Politics in China**

Key among the factors that facilitate China’s assertive foreign policy strategy in the SCS is the broader domestic political change in China. The Chinese Communist Party has been facing various fundamental challenges to its domestic legitimacy (Feng & He, 2018). Within the borders of China, domestic politics have been characterized by issues such as corruption, pollution, material inequality, and infighting within the Communist Party (Haugland et al., 2018). According to Buszynski (2019), these issues have compelled the Chinese government to stir nationalistic fervor, rallying the Chinese population toward a constructed external threat. Whether the threat was built or not, indeed, the dispute over Senkaku Island with Japan, the clash with Vietnam, the litigation with the Philippines, and the UNCLOS resolution contributed to a growth in patriotism. These cases helped the Chinese government divert the public’s attention from government efforts to sustain high levels of equitable economic growth and resolve internal issues such as environmental pollution and growing material inequalities.

To decry the alleged breaking of the international trade system, the United States administration, under the Presidency of Trump, has leveled accusations against the Chinese regime, citing China’s unfair trading as well as the theft of intellectual property from American companies (Feng & He, 2018). From 2018 onwards, the Trump administration implemented various tariffs targeting goods produced in China and prevented individual Chinese companies linked to areas vital to the National Interest from operating on U.S. soil and its allies (Friedberg & Boustany, 2020). As a result, the ensuing trade war has strengthened anti-American sentiments in China, which is part of a broader effort to bring the Chinese state under the leadership of the Communist Party (Feng & He, 2018). Amid domestic challenges, along with the perceived threat of the United States’ foreign policy under the Biden administration, Xi Jinping could rule over China indefinitely, as Chinese lawmakers passed legislation under which presidential term limits are effectively abolished.

This strategic move, coupled with efforts to mobilize public support for the Chinese mobilization of the SCS, is meant to bolster the authority of Xi Jinping. Most remarkably, the rise of civilian activities and increased military presence in the SCS is synonymous with recent Chinese foreign policy (Buszynski, 2019). For example, in 2012, China classified the SCS as a core national territory, meaning China would be willing to fight to defend its claim to the SCS, placing it among other hot-button issues such as Tibet and Taiwan (Buszynski, 2019). Moreover, going by China’s insistence on the one-China policy regarding Taiwan, China could likely demand that other countries recognize its sovereignty over the SCS in exchange for China establishing and maintaining formal diplomatic relations with these states (M. T. Fravel, 2017).
China continues to show disinterest in finding solutions to disputes in the SCS within the confines of international institutions. The Chinese government has maintained non-acceptance and nonparticipation in arbitration proceedings in The Hague regarding SCS disputes (Wong, 2018). On the contrary, China has demonstrated a balanced strategy of interest in cooperating with the ASEAN regarding SCS disputes, which could be instrumental in resolving these disputes with external actors (Zhao, 2017). Strategically, China chose to engage in bilateral initiatives with the states with claims in the SCS in full understanding that the Chinese regime has a more significant influence than those individual states. Through bilateral negotiations, China granted a series of socio-economic benefits and even accepted certain restrictions to obtain support in multilateral negotiations. Thus, China sought an agreement under ASEAN’s designations by submitting proposals that met its demands. For instance, in 2018, ASEAN members and China drafted an agreement on the SCS Code of Conduct Negotiation Text (SDNT). China proposed that members should not carry out joint military activities with nations outside the region (Thayer, 2019). A clear tactic by China to push the U.S. Bluewater fleet out of China’s backyard.

The social-compact outcome is that the decision-making processes are not rejected but negotiated. According to Teixeira and Pavia (2021), the Social Compact is the process in which an institution with regional consent to establish order and authority will determine an explicit social conception of regional order centered on cooperative negotiations of shared perceived values, norms, and duties between them, resulting in a social compact. (p. 78)

The compact represents a mutual and limited transfer of engagement, as noted by Teixeira and Pavia (2021) “to a regional member is provided some privileges by others in return for certain constraints, benefits, duties or provide development that uphold the region and its members” (p. 78).

Testing the Contest for Regional Hegemony

For more than seven decades, North America has dominated the SCS using hard and soft power (including economic and cultural influence) to shape other states’ geopolitics and preferences. As a result, the country has been able to establish a robust and safe power relation. However, recently, despite the United States’ enticement and pressure, its allies, including the Philippines, Australia, and Japan, have declined the United States’ request to join in pressuring for the FONOPs in the SCS against Beijing’s claims. Furthermore, Indonesia has disapproved of the United States’ power projections in the region. Similarly, since the 2014 military coup in Thailand, the United States’ relations with that country have not been great, and Bangkok seems to lean toward China.

Malaysian–American relations have been difficult after America took an interest in the financial dealings of Prime Minister Najib (Valencia, 2018). Even the staunch strategic partnership with Singapore has not prevented this country from adopting a more neutral stance between China and the United States. A perfect example of the states’ difficulties in balancing their relationship with both powers involves the Philippines’ reaction to the United States. Hopper’s free navigation in 2018 near Scarborough Shoal, which the Philippines did not support. According to the Philippine presidential spokesman, China’s protest against the FONOPs in the SCS is a problem for Washington, as the Philippines intends to pursue an independent foreign policy. Thus, the United States’ problem is no longer a problem for the Philippines (Valencia, 2018). Most U.S. allies fear being caught up between Washington’s and Beijing’s struggle for dominance in the SCS.

The Chinese militarization of the SCS is a clear indication that China has a newfound drive and confidence in getting away with undermining North American power. In addition to China’s investment in airfields, ports, and artificial islands that could potentially host massive military equipment and vessels, various credible sources point to Beijing’s intention to build several nuclear power plants in the SCS, which adds to the precariousness of the region’s security (Rolf & Agnew, 2016). China is strategically targeting the SCS as a means of making it difficult for the United States to maintain its influence in the SCS region (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). By establishing naval and aerial facilities in the SCS, China intends to substantially increase the material and political costs for the United States in fueling anti-Chinese narratives and policies of other claimant states to the SCS that partner with the United States (Carter, 2018). In the short run, China does not necessarily aim at aspiring to victory in a war with the United States (Teo, 2018). However, China’s mere military presence in the SCS is enough to deter the United States from using military force against China in a haphazard manner (Carter, 2018). In this regard, the United States-dominated regional order around the SCS faces severe challenges.

Recently, China signed the world’s largest trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), with the 10 ASEAN states and four U.S. allies, South Korea, New Zealand, Japan, and Australia. China then entitled itself the champion of globalization and cooperation. Premier Li Keqiang (2020) noted, The signing, which came after eight years of negotiation, offers a ray of light and hope to people facing the gloomy international landscape and shows that multilateralism and free trade is the right way and remains the correct direction for the world economy and all people.

China’s rise has bolstered its position in the world order and has strengthened its ability to deter aggressive retaliation from existing powers. China has unexpectedly risen as a
challenger to the United States’ dominance in the world stage of politics and has also surpassed the United States to become the world’s largest economy in October 2020 (Allison, 2020). The debate and the economic predictions on whether China overtakes the United States as the larger economy are now conclusive. Nevertheless, this does not indicate that it is the strongest and most capable power in the system. China can have a double-sized economy, hold proportional scientific and technological power, and still, if it does not turn that capacity into a super military power, the United States will remain the predominant actor. This aligns with the PTT that argues that a rising challenger replaces the dominant power to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, amid the reinforcement of North American presence in the region, China’s relentless strengthening of bilateral ties with smaller nations in Asia that have traditionally been allies of the United States poses a serious challenge to the U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the wake of growing Chinese economic and military might, the United States and its allies have formulated and implemented various countermeasures. First, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes Australia, Japan, India, and the United States, aims to rally a coordinated response to threats against law-based world order (Scobell, 2018). Second, the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance (which incorporates New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Britain, and the United States) increased cooperation with Japan and Germany to facilitate the sharing of classified information about China’s foreign activities (Zhou, 2020). Third, North America’s strongest ally in East Asia, Japan, has heightened its military cooperation with other claimant states to the SCS, including the Philippines and Vietnam, while the United States dramatically increases its military drills in the SCS. Therefore, in response to China’s militarization of the SCS and land reclamation efforts, smaller claimant states have begun bolstering their military defense apparatus and are more open to assistance from the United States.

Nonetheless, the resilience of China is hard to challenge, particularly with its ever-increasing assertiveness. Similarly, China has allies throughout Asia based on its strategic thinking and a foreign policy that has proven influential (Murphy & Roberts, 2018). The country unshakably pursues an independent foreign policy of fomenting peace, including preserving its territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty by creating a favorable global environment for its expansion. Coupled with Sino-Arab relations, China remains a force to reckon with, and even if the United States establishes relations with nations in Asia, it is difficult to defeat China as a rapidly rising challenger (Murphy & Roberts, 2018). According to Zhang (2020), China has had an implicit mission in the SCS since the 1990s. While it is not a regional dominant power or embraces a hybrid coercion strategy, its mission is to use the SCS to balance its goals, defend its rights, and ensure stability in the region. The balancing strategy is not straightforward, and since 2009 the rising power has altered its stance, asserting its rightful place in the regional geopolitics.

The strategy was publicized in 2013 after President Xi announced that China wanted to achieve its rights-stability balance (Zhang, 2020). However, while the rise of Beijing is undeniable, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States was larger by 50% against the Chinese GDP. The United States’ share of the global economy has virtually remained unchanged from 1980 when the country accounted for 25.2% of the universal GDP. In 2018, North America’s share of the world’s GDP accounted for 24.1%. While the Chinese economy grew, it did not grow at the expense of the United States but of other developed nations. By 2018, China’s GDP rose to 15.9% as compared to 1.7% in 1980. Moreover, after peaking in 2007 at 14.2%, China’s GDP gradually fell. While Indo-Pacific polls indicate that the United States’ best years are gone, regional approval ratings for China have also fallen. However, these numbers do not display the impressive reality of its latest achievement: China’s poverty eradication. According to the World Bank (2021), China performed the miracle of lifting more than 800 million of its population out of poverty.

In terms of military power in the Indo-Pacific, North America has more than 370,000 military personnel and contractors, 200 naval ships and submarines, and 2,000 aircraft. America’s Pacific fleet remains the largest navy globally, while its Pacific Air Forces comprise the second biggest air force in the world. The United States has five allies in the Pacific, complemented by key security partners, plus numerous military bases. The United States’ direct investment in the Indo-Pacific exceeds China, South Korea, and Japan combined, while its commercial activities in the region are approximated at $2.3 trillion yearly. Moreover, the United States’ military and strategic footprint in the region are expanding, particularly after the Asia Pivot was declared in 2011, which led to an increase in troops of more than 20,000 (Layne, 2018). This led to some of the most advanced naval technologies to Japan, plus new combat ships in Singapore. Washington has renewed its defense guidelines with Japan and a defense pact with the Philippines to access military bases. A novel North American Maritime Security Initiative has been distributing security assistance to selected partners in the SCS. Furthermore, a strong Freedom Navigation Operation has been challenging illegitimate claims made by China in the SCS. In recent years, the United States held a joint military exercise with ASEAN as well as joint exercises in the region with the Philippines, Japan, and India.

Meanwhile, President Biden is betting on a unified front of allies, with a new rule-based order to promote a free and open SCS and contain China’s territorial ambitions; the congress had already supported a strong Indo-Pacific policy through the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. In
addition, Trump’s administration introduced a few initiatives to foster transparent infrastructure in the SCS (Blue Dot Network, Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative, Build Act, and the Asian Edge program) amid increasing criticism of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (Layne, 2018). Therefore, it is unclear whether Beijing will be able to replace Washington as the dominant force in the SCS. Everything depends on several factors, but the U.S. strategy and its outcome are the crucial elements that will prescribe the future SCS hegemony.

Final Considerations

In many ways, China’s rise in an American-led global system has triggered the United States–China transition of power. In reconsideration, the power transition began after China embarked on a modernization strategy in 1978 (A. Goldstein, 2007). Signs of China’s rise caught global attention in the early 1990s, and its growth subsequently speeded up in the early 2000s. Colossal changes took place, and the China threat emerged, overshadowing its relations with the external world (Yilmaz & Xiangyu, 2019). China had never played a part in building the existing global order; instead, it had sought its destruction many decades before 1978. At that time, China had no possibility of challenging the American-led order; instead, it was required to become part of this system, particularly in terms of economic development (Regilme & Parisot, 2019). China’s present-day misfortunes aside, the country has a tremendous socio-political, strategic, and cultural tradition. But China’s rise has been under the control of an authoritarian regime that rejects globally shared democratic ideologies (Beitelman, 2019).

According to Gries and Jing (2019), by 2009, the America–Chinese power transition had entered a novel phase, which is likely to extend to 2050. The most defining aspect of it is narrowing power gaps between the system leader and the rising power. On one side, the system leader has developed strategic anxiety and uneasiness regarding the newly emerged Beijing and its implications on the global order (Pan & Kavalski, 2018). But, on the contrary, the existing leader (the United States) still intends to shape, manage, and influence the rising power. Meanwhile, while its supremacy and hegemony have been eroded, the United States strives to take a strong position against the newcomer or even launch a defensive strike to upset the rising power (Yilmaz & Xiangyu, 2019). On the contrary, China has become very confident regarding its capabilities.

PTT is founded on two major assumptions: (a) a states’ power comes from internal development, and (b) the global system is decisively shaped by the dominant state or hegemony (Gries & Jing, 2019). The occasions whereby the rising nation surpasses the dominant leader are known as power transition. Such transitions can be peaceful (such as when the United States overtook Britain), especially if the rising power is satisfied with the global order (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). However, some transitions can result in war if the rising power is dissatisfied (Beitelman, 2019). Therefore, the central question is whether China’s rise will inevitably presage the onset of global instability or a war in the SCS. Some scholars believe that China’s case is not like other superpowers, such as Germany (Kim & Gates, 2015). An important aspect of PTT is the stability of international systems. Like the hegemonic stability framework, PTT indicates that stability and sustenance are achieved by hegemonic dominance by power preponderance (Beckley, 2020). However, PTT does not anticipate a direct confrontation between the United States and China in the SCS dispute.

According to Mearsheimer’s (2014) realism theory, a hegemonic war between a rising challenger and a declining system leader is inescapable. War happens when a declining hegemony tries to maintain the status quo as the rising challenger attempts to restructure the global system into a new order that favors its interests. Conversely, PTT enhances a diplomatic dimension by the declining power and its partners to evade a destructive war (Kim & Gates, 2015). Shirfinson (2020) noted that a peaceful power transition is possible between an ascendant power and a declining hegemony because the latter can use different ways to prolong its preponderance. As a result, the rising power might not dare to challenge the declining dominant state.

Some power transition researchers have identified various factors that can escalate the likelihood of wars: power parity between the declining and rising challenger and the challenger’s dissatisfaction levels with the status quo (Pan & Kavalski, 2018). Contrary to the balance of power theory, which suggests that balance of power by alignment and realignment among superpower can result in stability, PTT claims that power parity results in major warfare (Waltz, 1990). Hence, PTT argues that the dominant power’s preservation of power preponderance can prevent a war among superpowers while balancing it could cause destabilization (Liang, 2018). At the same time that PTT is still being analyzed, the globe is witnessing China’s rise at an unprecedented speed, intricacy, and scale. China’s perilous relationship with the existing global order, that is, the United States’ hegemony in the SCS, begs the question of whether a power transition will occur smoothly or result in a war. In an analysis of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, the ancient Athenian historian and military general Thucydides was one of the first to demonstrate that power transitions can result in war (Garlick, 2016). Thucydides argued that Athens’ power expansion and growth were seen as a threat by the Spartans and ultimately resulted in war between two powerful states.

Other scholars have different opinions regarding power transition. For instance, Regilme and Parisot (2017) argue that China cannot achieve a global hegemony status because it lacks a global ideology to counter the United States’ self-proclaimed exceptionalism and control and mediation of global affairs to achieve the greater good. As the U.S.
economy struggles to gain ground and its capability to shape international politics declines, the world might be moving toward a multipolar system (Regilme & Parisot, 2017). Latin American nations are increasingly exercising new autonomy thanks to the Monroe Doctrine, while other nations like Brazil, Russia, South Africa, and China are establishing transnational links to circumvent the U.S. leadership. According to Drezner et al. (2020), power has changed, and so has its exercise. North America might be the most prominent leader, its capabilities may still be the strongest, but it is no longer a unique dominant force—it is an influential but aimless nation in a diffuse global disorder.

Nevertheless, some scholars still believe that the United States’ power centrality in the modern global order is unmatchable (Bremmer, 2015; Hung, 2015; Parisot, 2013). This viewpoint suggests that the United States remains the contemporary global capitalism manager since its economy is increasingly powerful, supported by the dollar and Wall Street (Regilme & Parisot, 2017). At this point, China remains deeply incorporated within the U.S. economy and lacks the capability to offer an alternative leadership. Also, the U.S. military is still the most powerful and robust in terms of economic spending and technology. Therefore, while China is relatively more powerful than in the past, the United States is still positioned as the global leader in the foreseeable future (Regilme & Parisot, 2017). In the case of the SCS, while military interventions reveal China’s assertiveness, Beijing’s interests are deeply interwoven with those of the United States; it is unlikely that China will not go to war to oust the United States, but will rather try and protect its borders from other adversaries.

While China might be seeking hegemony in the SCS, the United States’ ability to assert its position is increasingly constrained by its hegemonic responsibilities. Shifrinson (2020) notes that the dominant power’s expectations for the status quo to sustain and reinforce its rule are limited in the SCS. Li (2016) argues that while North America and China might seem to have opposing interests in the SCS, their bilateral collaborations in other areas remain essential. During Obama’s administration, Washington and China worked closely on several governance issues, such as trade, RMB exchange, Tibet, and Cross-Strait. Such relations were sustained despite diplomatic antagonism (Choi, 2018). Therefore, China and the United States might pursue a dualistic policy involving construction undertakings, through diplomacy and defensive confrontation, through public diplomacy to defend their security interests or vulnerable state in the SCS where the challenger is also located (Allison, 2020). According to Graham Allison, China has already overtaken the United States as the world’s largest economy, noting that,

Measured by the yardstick that both the IMF and CIA now judge to be the single best metric for comparing national economies, China’s economy is No 1. Today its economy is about a sixth larger than the US ($24.2 trillion versus the US, $20.8 trillion). If that seems hard to believe, check the IMF’s 2020 World Economic Outlook.

Moreover, for the new North American president Joe Biden, China is clearly a serious rival, a true “Thucydidean rival.”

**Conclusion**

China is confident, and this has been the talk beyond Washington for almost two decades. The most noted signs of assertiveness are its actions and the newly proactive and tougher stances toward Washington. China’s renewed and forceful move into the SCS has raised many eyebrows, as has its highly contested and self-assured push for a global change and regional dominance. Fundamentally, Beijing’s change of behavior does not aim to overthrow the United States but to reclaim its regional hegemony position, as it is also a natural outgrowth of its expanding powers. Its assertiveness reflects the typical behavior of the hegemony transition occurring between the United States and China. On the contrary, Washington has taken a defensive position as its struggles to find ways of dealing with China’s rising presence in the SCS. The Asian Pacific countries are closely watching the unfolding of the America-China power transition and are likely to adjust their policies to fit their interests.

Power transition was set into motion by the rise of a former underdeveloped big country, dissatisfied with the existing global political systems and powerful patrons. With its growing and expanding powers taking shape, an assertive China wants to make changes impulsively, circumventing existing rules and systems that purportedly worked against its national interests. Such changes challenge the existing global order. In case that the challenger (China) and the United States do not come to terms to enable a smooth transition, they might settle their disputes through war. Rising China may wish to evade confrontation; since it is only a matter of time before the global leader (the United States) is surpassed, why should China ruin its stability by engaging in a fight? Nonetheless, the emerging realities might compel China to opt-out of such a cool-headed calculation because the state’s intentions are proportional to its capabilities. Thus, it is likely that the power transition in the SCS will involve the Thucydides Trap.

PTT offers a basis for pessimism regarding the numerous territorial conflicts within the SCS. From a PTT’s perspective, the rise of China in this theater is associated with its desire to develop a blue-water navy with the intent of securing the strategic sea-lanes far from Beijing’s mainland. Also, China intends to secure its natural resources. With its expanding influence in the SCS, China is becoming a major contender or challenger of the North American navy’s Pacific command and of the nearby nations closely aligned to the United States (such as Indonesia, Philippines, and Japan).
Therefore, the reasoning of PTT proposes that China’s ability to achieve its goals in the SCS disputes (including realizing its sovereignty claims) constitutes an initial prophecy of China’s progression in becoming a rival competitor of the United States.

Beijing’s capability to install a challenge in the SCS could be an indication of a hegemony transition rather than a rising of influence in neighboring regions in Asia. If Beijing effectively establishes its influence in the SCS and shapes events, it will herald a significant step in climbing the hierarchical ladder. In this sense, it is expected that both powers defend their interests. The theory predicts an increase in the odds of confrontation, with China more confident and assertive, and the United States more nervous, having lost the economic battle. The United States–China transition of power varies significantly from past transitions. While there is no guide for the United States and China in the unfolding events, many changes are expected, particularly in the SCS. China’s ultimate success in modernizing its economy and military is not a foregone conclusion, and the probability of achieving most of its development goals by 2050 remains high. China’s rising trend is unlikely to be stopped by external forces; only Beijing can defeat itself, particularly the Communist Party of China (CPC). The CPC holds the key to Beijing’s future and remains well-positioned to utilize the one-party authoritarian regime to pursue its agendas in the SCS.

China will reach parity with the United States as Beijing vigorously prepares for such an eventuality in the foreseeable future. Beijing has repeatedly reassured the world that it is different from other great powers because it does not have any plans to overthrow the existing global order. However, the United States has never taken China’s promise with good faith because no genuine trust exists between them. In the SCS, similar suspicions have been observed in every state fighting to secure its interests. There must be given and take during power transitions, and only win–win solutions will ensure that Beijing and Washington evade confrontations and the Thucydides Trap.

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