

## Tensions in the South China Sea

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*This article discusses the ongoing tensions over sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, and how these tensions will evolve over the next five years by examining China's continued desire for survival in the international system through a defensive realist lens. Using this international relations theory, the article argues that tensions will continue to grow between actors in the South China Sea, as China becomes more aggressive over its sovereignty claims in the area owing to resources in the South China Sea, and the increased necessity for these resources for China's continued growth in the international system. The article then briefly examines how these future developments in the South China Sea could potentially effect the Sino-U.S. relationship.*

The twenty-first century has seen a pivot in Chinese foreign policy to what China called in the early 2000s, a “peaceful rise”.<sup>1</sup> Despite a rhetoric of seeking to establish peaceful relationships, territorial conflicts in the South China Sea suggests that such a discourse by China is simply window dressing on what can be understood as power politics and the fight for state survival in the international system. Although China may hope for a “peaceful rise” in the South China Sea, this paper will argue that conflicting sovereignty disputes and the necessity of the South China Sea for the Chinese will challenge the peaceful aspect of that phrase. Using the international relations theory of defensive realism as a predictive theory, this paper will argue that sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea will potentially become increasingly aggressive and more frequent over the next five years, resulting in a heavy strain on the Sino-U.S. relationship, as the United States will attempt to balance China's rise in the area and consequently in the international system.

The first section of this paper will provide a brief overview of the theory of defensive realism and the increasingly tense situation in the South China Sea. This will then be followed by the application of defensive realism to establish China's rationale underlying its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea to understand how these claims will evolve over the next five years. Finally, this paper will address how the United States will respond to these evolved sovereignty disputes, and the effect that will have on the Sino-U.S. relationship.

To understand this argument about the present and future fate of the South China Sea, an overview of the theory of defensive realism is crucial. Realism, simply put, argues that conflict is natural

among states in order to increase or protect their power. Defensive realism further defines this by assuming competition and state preparation for worst case scenarios, and arguing for the acquisition of as much power as necessary to guarantee a states security. Defensive realism argues that in the absence of an official “night watchman”, the international system is anarchic, and as such states will practice self-help; they will do what they must to ensure the survival and security of the state in the international system. The theory assumes that in the interest of security, states will try to reduce the threat other states pose to their interests through engaging in balancing, often through alliances or treaties. This concept of self-help comes hand-in-hand with the realist concept of egoism: that states are always looking out for themselves. As a consequence of this egoism, states can never be sure of the intentions of other states which can become obvious in military terms. As states seek to help themselves in the international system by building up their capabilities and getting stronger, other states begin to fear for their security leading them to take action; this can result in an arms race, and elevated levels of insecurity, as states cannot be sure if military spending is offensive or defensive.<sup>ii</sup>

The South China Sea is crucial for the development and continued survival of it’s surrounding states in the international system for three main reasons: it’s integral position for international trade, it’s estimated oil reserves, and it’s abundant seafood potential. The South China Sea is the highway for more than half of the world’s annual merchant fleet tonnage, and one third of all maritime traffic worldwide<sup>iii</sup>. In addition, the South China Sea has proven oil reserves of seven billion barrels, and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas<sup>iv</sup>. Looking at these statistics it is easy to understand how crucial the South China Sea is in terms of power potential in the international system. What makes the region so tense is conflicting sovereignty disputes. Robert Kaplan explains some of these: “Brunei claims a southern reef of the Spratlys. Malaysia claims 3 islands in the Spratlys. The Philippines claims eight islands in the Spratlys and significant portions of the South China Sea. Vietnam, Taiwan, and China each claims much of the South China Sea, as well as all of the Spratly and Paracel island groups”<sup>v</sup>. China dominates claims in the South China Sea, claiming the largest area known as the “cow’s tongue”, which is essentially the heart of the entire South China Sea.<sup>vi</sup> Some of these claims are based in history, while others are based on the United Nations Law of the Sea, claiming that states have sovereignty to “Exclusive Economic Zones” that extend two hundred miles straight out from their coasts<sup>vii</sup>. Although some of these claims have their roots in history, the twenty-first century has seen an unprecedented growth in the amount of disputes and conflict over these sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, particularly beginning in 2010-2011. The documented instances of confrontation and dispute have more than tripled in 2010-2011 in comparison with 2004-2005<sup>viii</sup>.

In 2011, the Chinese made a submission to the United Nations actually making a claim of a full two hundred nautical miles around each of the Spratly Islands. Suddenly, such claims, in combination with China’s ongoing military expansion, made everyone fearful of a rising Chinese power<sup>ix</sup>. This corresponds directly with the increase in confrontations in the South China Sea, as well as an ongoing arms race between nations in the South China Sea over the last decade. According to Kaplan, defence budgets in Southeast Asia have increased by about a third in the past decade, arms imports to Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have increased by up to 722 percent, while Vietnam and China have spent billions developing their submarine technologies<sup>x</sup>. Defensive realism provides an explanation of how to interpret these trends in tandem: China needs the resources that the South China Sea can provide for it’s continued growth in the international system, while these smaller surrounding states fear an

increasingly strong China and attempt to balance China's rise, as well as secure some resources for themselves.

As stated before, the South China Sea really is crucial for these states to develop and survive. Kaplan claims that the sea is the Philippines "economic lifeline for everything from fishing to energy exploration," and the loss of this area constitutes a "national security nightmare for Manila"<sup>xi</sup>. Although the South China Sea is crucial for any state, it's resources and trade access seem to be the most dire for China, which is why we see China being the most aggressive in it's claims. Energy consumption in developing Asian countries is expected to double by 2030 with China accounting for half of that growth<sup>xii</sup>. China's population is also supposed to reach it's peak of 1.5 billion people in 2030, requiring more access to food and energy<sup>xiii</sup>. China is desperate for new energy, Chinese oil reserves account for only 1.1% of the world total, while it consumes over 10% of world oil production, and 20% of all the energy consumed on the planet<sup>xiv</sup>. Finally, China's economy is export based. Access to trade routes in the South China Sea are necessary for China to support it's economy. For China to continue on it's course as a rising power, it needs access to these resources and strategic location.

What exacerbates the problem even further is this distrust, that no state can be sure of the intentions of other states. China is surrounded by five countries which it has been at war with at some point in the past seventy years, it has had border disputes since 1949 with every one of it's twenty immediate neighbours, and all of China's larger neighbours are historical rivals of China, while the smaller ones are wary of Chinese influence<sup>xv</sup>. This creates added insecurity to an international system that already fosters it. The result of this is increased conflict between states in the South China Sea, and the arms race mentioned earlier. We can see China being so aggressive because it needs the South China Sea, and it cannot be sure of what a South China Sea in the possession of it's neighbours might look like for China; looking at the statistics, this is not a gamble that China can afford to lose if it wants to maintain it's power and security in the international system.

Based on the argument presented above; I predict that sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea over the next five years will be dominated by China attempting to establish it's sovereignty in the cow's tongue, especially as China nears closer to that 2030 population and energy consumption peak, while smaller states continue to resist a Chinese dominated South China Sea, and fight for their state survival in the international system. China is looking for survival and security, and the South China Sea gives it the means to secure both. It's sheer size requires China to claim more of the South China Sea to survive, and with it's future looming on the horizon, China needs to become more aggressive until it can achieve this security for the years to come in order to maintain it's international power.

Where the United States comes into play in this situation is through the concept of balancing mentioned earlier in this paper. The United States will undoubtedly become increasingly involved in balancing China and it's claims in the South China Sea as it's involvement is two fold: the United States will attempt to balance China for it's own power politics interests as a regional hegemon, and it's these interests that have brought the United States into alliances with states in the South China Sea that expect the U.S. to guarantee their security as well. The United States has five bilateral defence treaties with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Philippines, and a close defence cooperation with Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and a host of cooperative arrangements with other

countries in the region<sup>xvi</sup>. As mentioned earlier, treaties and alliances are an example of how states attempt to balance. The United States is the military power behind these smaller states who are wary of China's rise in the region.

We can anticipate that some of these treaties and alliances may come into play as China continues to exert its claims in the South China Sea over the next five years. Despite the appearance of a strong relationship on the surface, the Sino-U.S. relationship is vulnerable to tension as the two have always held a purely strategic relationship. The Sino-U.S. relationship only took off during the Cold War Era after China broke ties with the Soviet Union and it was strategically beneficial for the both parties to open relations<sup>xvii</sup>. Since then, the U.S. and China have a relationship based on their common interest: trade. Although this has maintained a relatively peaceful relationship there are cracks in the foundation that will cause increased tensions as China rises in power through territorial claims in the South China Sea. We see that despite an interconnected relationship, the United States is not willing to release it's balancing chips in the South China Sea as it is still involved in these alliances, and despite repetitive, explicit requests from China, refuses to completely cut it's ties with Taiwan<sup>xviii</sup>. The U.S. has also ignored explicit requests to have it's military leave the area, although the size of the United States military presence in the region, the U.S. Navy still dominates the South China Sea<sup>xix</sup>. This suggests that the United States prioritizes it's potential to balance China's rise, over it's desire to create a truly cohesive relationship with China. Nathan and Scobell write "It is only logical to assume that a country as powerful as the U.S. will use it's power resources to preserve its privileges and will treat efforts by other countries to protect their interests as threats to its own security. As China rises the U.S. can be expected to resist,"<sup>xx</sup> and this is exactly what I predict to happen in the South China Sea if I am correct about China increasing it's assertiveness to claim the Cow's tongue. The United States will see this rise and increased access to such resources and strategic routes as a threat to U.S. dominance and attempt to balance China either through further institutions and alliances or increased military presence.

The international relations theory of defensive realism can help us understand China's current position in the South China Sea, and how that position will evolve over the next five years, and even beyond that. China needs the South China Sea, and will strive for it's survival in the international system through it's sovereignty disputes in the region. This will result in increased Sino-U.S. tensions as the United States attempts to balance China's rise in the region. It may not be all grim, as increased tensions may not always mean war. If the United States can effectively balance China's rise and sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, we may see a relatively peaceful, or at least tentatively stable stalemate in the South China Sea.

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- <sup>i</sup> Nathan Andrew, and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, (Chichester, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 29.
- <sup>ii</sup> Doctor Esarey, "Introduction to International Relations Theory," Lecture, University of Alberta, Edmonton, September 8, 2015.
- <sup>iii</sup> Kaplan Robert, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, (New York, NY: Random House LLC, 2014), 9.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid., 10
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 11
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> "Flashpoints: Security in the East and South China Seas," Centre for a New American Security, Accessed October 8, 2015.
- <sup>ix</sup> Kaplan Robert, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, 173.
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid., 19
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 127
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid., 11
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 10
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xv</sup> Nathan Andrew, and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 4.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., 94
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., 79
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid., 99-105
- <sup>xix</sup> Kaplan Robert, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, 14.
- <sup>xx</sup> Nathan Andrew, and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 99.