

FIVE

Stormy Seas

The South China Sea in US-China Relations

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In September 2018, a near collision occurred when a Chinese destroyer navigated on a vector to intercept a US destroyer that was conducting a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the Spratly Islands. As the first such potential collision between the United States and China near these rocks and reefs, the event captures how the South China Sea (SCS) has come to assume a more prominent role in US-China relations. China has an interest in defending and consolidating its sovereignty claims, which entails limiting US involvement in the disputes. At the same time, the United States asserts national interests in these waters, especially over navigation rights, along with the peaceful settlement of disputes and the preservation of a rules-based international order. Toward this end, the United States conducts FONOPs, provides maritime security assistance to several claimants, has strengthened its alliance with the Philippines, has improved military-to-military ties with Vietnam, and has deepened engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Based on an examination of American and Chinese views of each

other's role in the SCS over the last decade, we argue that the dispute has increased the scope and intensity of security competition between the United States and China. Since the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012, the SCS disputes have expanded from a contest over sovereign rights among the claimants into one over the regional order, including the balance of power and international norms and rules. Each side now views the SCS disputes as a litmus test for the other's intentions—for China, whether the US seeks to contain it; for the US, whether China seeks to overturn the existing regional order.

This shift in how each side views the other in the South China Sea is the result of intersecting conflicts of interest created by unresolved territorial disputes and the US-China power transition. Although the increased rivalry that has accompanied the ongoing power shift has elevated tensions in the South China Sea, action-reaction dynamics between the United States and China in the SCS also fuel broader strategic competition between the two. On the one hand, China views the US involvement in the SCS disputes, motivated by an interest in preserving the current regional order, as a threat not just to its sovereignty claims but to its rise more generally. On the other hand, the United States views China's efforts to strengthen its claims and influence in the SCS as a threat to the regional order and US leadership in the region. These conflicts of interest are mutually reinforcing and fuel spiraling competition. Each side views itself as defensively motivated, but has taken actions that have given the other side incentives to push back. As this chapter shows, interactions between the US and China in the South China Sea over the last decade have hardened perceptions of each other's intentions, increasing the stakes for each of strategic competition in the region.

These findings carry two important implications. First, our conclusion has important implications for how the United States and China view each other as strategic rivals. Specifically, both sides see the other as posing a challenge beyond the confines of the SCS disputes. The United States and China draw conclusions about the "type" of state the other is based on actions that each takes to defend its interests in these waters. The US has concluded that China is a revisionist state with ambitions to dominate the region, while China has concluded that the US is a stubborn hegemon that seeks to thwart China's rise.

Second, our findings suggest that unresolved disputes over sovereignty or sovereign rights, such as the territorial and maritime claims

in the SCS, can interact with power transitions in dangerous ways.¹ Under such conditions, the United States and China risk becoming entangled in an escalatory spiral similar to that of the security dilemma. Although a traditional security dilemma is marked by the absence of an objective conflict of interest,² in the case of US-China competition in the SCS, each side defends its own interests at the perceived cost of the other. Hardened beliefs about intentions lead each to push back in ways that are perceived as further threatening the other's interests. By fueling action-reaction dynamics, disputes over sovereignty can exacerbate the perilous dynamics associated with power transitions.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify how the United States and China perceive each other's role in the SCS disputes. Rather than assess the accuracy of these perceptions, we instead focus on how the inferences they draw about each other's intentions have evolved over the last decade. For identifying perceptions of intentions, the best sources would be the views of national leaders. Of course, these are difficult to ascertain, especially when studying a contemporary topic. Moreover, the Chinese government generally publishes fewer publicly available policy documents with which to assess such perceptions. Thus, for US perceptions of Chinese intentions, we draw on the writings of scholars and policy analysts on the South China Sea as well as references to the disputes in key government documents and speeches by US leaders. For Chinese perceptions of US intentions, we rely on the writings of Chinese scholars and policy analysts published by state-affiliated research institutes. Given limited access to internal documents, these publications provide the next best alternative to authoritative perceptions. We also supplement these writings with leadership speeches and policy documents when and where available.

This chapter first provides an overview of the key actions taken by the US and China in the SCS that have shaped how each views the intentions of the other. It then traces Chinese views of US involvement in the SCS disputes from 2009 to 2014. Next, the chapter provides an account of US perceptions of Chinese actions in the disputes from 2014 to 2020 before returning to Chinese views of US behavior in the same period. The concluding section provides some implications of the analysis.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF KEY EVENTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

This chapter's main claim is that the pursuit of conflicting interests in the South China Sea by the United States and China has contributed to a transformation in how each side views the other's broader strategic intentions. This section reviews briefly the key actions taken by the United States and China to advance their interests in the SCS that have shaped mutual perceptions of intentions.³

A useful starting point for the current tensions in the SCS is May 2009, which marked the deadline to submit claims to extended continental shelf rights to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Public submissions, especially by Vietnam and Malaysia, created incentives for other states to challenge these submissions to affirm their own claims in the South China Sea. In its *note verbale* challenging Vietnam's individual and joint submission with Malaysia, China repeated its claim to sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys, along with "adjacent waters." More noteworthy, perhaps, a map attached to China's *note verbale* depicted the "nine-dashed line" along with the island groups, indicating to many the potential scope of China's claims to adjacent waters.⁴ These claims, counterclaims, and counter-counterclaims ignited renewed efforts by all states to publicly defend their position in these disputes.

The United States joined the fray in 2010. At the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010, the United States organized twelve states to raise concerns about the issue, challenging China's preference for avoiding the "internationalization" of the disputes. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also issued a statement outlining the US position. The statement noted 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." It also underscored a commitment to "not taking sides" and opposing the threat or use of force.⁵ This statement was the first the United States had issued on the SCS since May 1995, after China seized Mischief Reef.⁶

In spring 2011, tensions escalated again. Chinese law enforcement vessels challenged Vietnamese seismic survey ships several times and a Philippine ship once. Although China in the summer of 2011 appeared to moderate its position in the SCS,⁷ the United States increased its engagement with the region and with other claimants. In October, Secretary Clinton introduced the US policy of the rebalance

(or “pivot”) to Asia, which President Obama further underscored in a speech to the Australian parliament the following month. When commemorating the US alliance with the Philippines in November, Clinton appeared to lean toward Manila by describing the SCS as the “West Philippine Sea” and stating that “we will always stand and fight with you to achieve the future we seek.”⁸

The year 2012 marked a turning point in China’s efforts to strengthen its SCS claims. In April 2012, Philippine marines moved to detain Chinese fishermen harvesting endangered giant clams inside Scarborough Shoal, a reef also claimed by China, about 135 miles from the Philippines. The situation quickly escalated into a standoff between the two countries to control the shoal, which ended with China taking control in June. Manila responded in January 2013 by notifying China of its intent to pursue arbitration under Article 287 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to challenge the validity of the nine-dashed line, among other claims. Beijing refused to participate, but the tribunal started its work in 2014 and issued its judgment in July 2016.

The year 2014 marked another and perhaps even more consequential turning point. In January, China began land reclamation on several of the Spratly features under its control, a process that would continue for the next eighteen months. When completed, China reclaimed 3,200 acres of land, later building three large military installations on Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs, which were largely completed in 2018. In May and June, China used a semi-submersible drilling rig, HYSY 981, to drill in waters near the Paracel Islands (under China’s control but claimed by Vietnam, but also part of Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone). Chinese coast guard vessels overwhelmed Vietnam’s attempt to disrupt the drilling.

The United States elevated its own involvement in 2015. In May, the US Navy invited CNN aboard a P-8 surveillance aircraft during a patrol over the SCS, a move designed to draw greater international attention to China’s activities, especially land reclamation.⁹ In October, the USS *Lassen*, a destroyer, conducted a FONOP by sailing within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-held Subi Reef to challenge China’s requirement of permission to enter its territorial sea. This was the first FONOP conducted in these waters since 2012. Even more important, and unlike all past FONOPs, this one was publicized. Since 2015, the US has conducted twenty-seven public FONOPs (as of June 2020) to

challenge what it views as China's excessive claims in the SCS around either the Paracels or the Spratlys.

CHINA'S VIEWS ON INITIAL US INVOLVEMENT (2009–2014)

From China's standpoint, two US actions attracted the most attention and concern. The first was the US decision to mobilize states to raise the South China Sea disputes at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting. The second was the US pivot to Asia amid its deepening involvement in the SCS. To China, increased US involvement emboldened other regional claimants, creating the need to more proactively assert its own SCS claims.

Even before the submissions of claims to the UN, tensions between the US and China increased in early 2009. In March 2009, five Chinese naval, law enforcement, and fishing vessels engaged in what Pentagon officials have described as “aggressive” and “unprofessional” maneuvers against the USNS *Impeccable*, an ocean surveillance ship that was operating in waters near Hainan Island.¹⁰ Although policy elites in China viewed the encounter with the *Impeccable* as part of a long-standing effort to oppose military surveillance within its EEZ,¹¹ China's confrontational behavior fueled concerns in the US over China's increasing assertiveness in its territorial disputes. For example, in July 2009, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Marciel testified on maritime disputes before the US Senate—only a few months after the USNS *Impeccable* incident and China's *note verbale* to the UN. Marciel's testimony was perhaps the first time in the 2000s that a US official discussed, on the record, the SCS disputes. As Marciel noted, “on a strategic level, to an extent, both issues highlight a growing assertiveness by China in regard to what it sees as its maritime rights.”¹² Nevertheless, Marciel did not portray China's actions as heralding a wider challenge beyond the scope and content of territorial and maritime claims.

Marciel's remarks portended an increase in US attention to and involvement in the SCS disputes. Chinese experts note that by mid-2010, the US had abandoned its position of neutrality in the territorial disputes in favor of “proactive intervention” (*jiji ganyu*) and “taking sides” (*xuanbianzhan*) with other claimant states against China.¹³ Chinese analysts point to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's efforts to promote a

multilateral resolution to the maritime disputes at the July 2010 ARF in Hanoi as the turning point that marked the United States' departure from neutrality.¹⁴ According to a statement by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US coordinated with other states to "[play] up the issue at the meeting," describing it as "an attack on China."¹⁵ Analyst Zhou Qi identifies Clinton's intervention at the ARF as "the start of the Sino-US dispute in the SCS."¹⁶ Since then, the United States has repeatedly stressed that the disputes should be settled in accordance with international law, a position that, according to Zhou, implies China's territorial claims do not comply with international law. As scholar Ju Hailong notes, the United States raised the SCS disputes at the ARF to strengthen relations with certain Southeast Asian claimant states and to "achieve the goal of containing China's strategic influence."¹⁷

Chinese observers watched warily as the United States deepened security cooperation with other claimants, viewing these efforts as further evidence that the United States had in practice abandoned its stated position of non-neutrality in the disputes.¹⁸ For example, they noted that in November 2011, weeks after Clinton announced the United States would "pivot" to Asia in a *Foreign Policy* essay, the US and the Philippines reaffirmed their defense treaty by signing the Manila Declaration.¹⁹ While in Manila, Clinton used the name "West Philippine Sea" to describe the South China Sea, a gesture one scholar suggested "reflects the United States' view that the South China Sea is key to its leadership position in the Asia-Pacific."²⁰ Since the 2010 ARF, the US also has taken measures to strengthen defense relations with Vietnam, as reflected by the exponential growth in US military financial assistance and the visit of Leon Panetta to Cam Ranh Bay, the first visit to the former US base by a US defense secretary since the Vietnam War.²¹

Chinese experts identified US support for these other claimants as the common denominator behind rising tensions between China and its neighbors, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. From this perspective, a pivotal example of US support emboldening claimant states was the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. Although Chinese experts noted the US's refusal to publicly side with the Philippines during the standoff, they also attributed the Philippines' tough stance to US support.²² US efforts to strengthen its alliance with Manila, according to Ju Hailong, emboldened the Philippines during and after the standoff, encouraging it to initiate international arbitration

against China in January 2013.²³ Chinese observers also highlighted perceived bias in US responses to incidents involving other claimant states, reflecting the Chinese view that the US was not pursuing a neutral position. For example, they noted that the United States singularly blamed China for the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, even though the Philippines, not China, initially responded by sending in a naval vessel.

Chinese experts viewed the US's increasing involvement in the SCS disputes as part of an effort to reassert its regional leadership and draw Southeast Asian countries together to encircle China,²⁴ a view that was reinforced by the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific. According to scholar Liu Jianhua, the pivot and broader US effort to contain China's rise served as a "magic wand of agitation" that emboldened regional claimants.²⁵ China blamed the division that ensued within ASEAN on US involvement.²⁶ This regional division was exposed at the July 2012 ARF in Cambodia, as the Philippines and Vietnam unsuccessfully tried to push through a joint statement that China opposed. According to analyst Liu Qing, the US fueled regional concerns about China's growing power and influence, calling attention to the SCS disputes to convince the region that China's rise would be associated with bullying and aggression.²⁷

When Xi Jinping became general secretary in late 2012, tensions in the SCS helped shape his perceptions of China's security environment. In remarks while reviewing the PLA Navy's South Sea Fleet in December 2012, Xi concluded that "the real threats our country faces is on the rise." According to Xi, the source of the problem was that "some neighboring countries, *under the instigation of some big countries outside the region*, have continued their actions in the SCS and increased their arms build-up to join hands and oppose us" [emphasis added]. Therefore, China "must fully recognize the severe challenges facing our maritime security."²⁸ Thus, at the highest level of the party, the United States was identified as a threat in the SCS.

Chinese analysts see the increased US military presence in the region as part of an effort to curb China's growing naval power. This presence includes access agreements, rotational deployments, military assistance, training, and weapons sales to states in the region.²⁹ According to Renmin University professor Shi Yinong, although China's efforts to strengthen its military capacity have bolstered its ability to defend its maritime sovereignty and rights claims, this focus

on “hard power” competition also encouraged the US military “re-balance” to the Asia-Pacific.³⁰ Chinese observers were particularly troubled by the strategic guidance the United States Department of Defense issued in January 2012, which warned of China’s ability to counter US power projection capabilities through asymmetric means.³¹ Chinese experts cited these defense guidelines, as well as the Pentagon’s establishment of the Air-Sea Strategy Office, in November 2011, as evidence that the United States sought to “step up implementation” of AirSea Battle, which they viewed as aimed at China’s military modernization.³² Chinese experts appear to view AirSea Battle as far more threatening than a mere operational concept, which is how the US military has described it. For example, in 2012, Zhu Feng, who heads a research institute on the South China Sea, suggested that as AirSea Battle moves from a military concept to an operational plan, the United States would transition toward a new “historic platform” from which to target China, the “imaginary enemy” behind the shift in US defense strategy.³³

Further contributing to the rising tensions and intensifying military competition that followed the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff was China’s efforts to fortify its sovereignty claims through land reclamation that began in early 2014. Chinese officials have generally downplayed Beijing’s land reclamation activities. The Chinese government refrained from publicly commenting on these activities until mid-2015, and afterward insisted that its construction on islands and reefs are for civilian purposes.³⁴ However, in private remarks before an expanded meeting of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping praised China’s island reclamation activities, describing them as a “historic breakthrough” that will “provide a strategic foundation for our children and the Chinese nation to win the struggle for rights and interests in the South China Sea.” Xi also declared that the strategic significance of China’s decision to pursue land reclamation “will emerge over time.”³⁵ Renmin University professor Zuo Xiyin, contemplating the strategic benefits these activities may carry, suggests that land reclamation has created a “new normal” in which China now has greater bargaining leverage in its disputes “due to dramatic changes in its actual control of the area.”³⁶

US VIEWS OF CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS (2014–2020)

A decade after Marciel's 2009 testimony, US perceptions of China's intentions in the South China Sea have shifted dramatically. As the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) assesses, "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region."³⁷ From the US standpoint, several Chinese actions attracted the most attention and concern, including China's rejection of the arbitral tribunal and its extensive land reclamation on all Chinese-held features to develop Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reefs into bases for projecting power in the SCS.

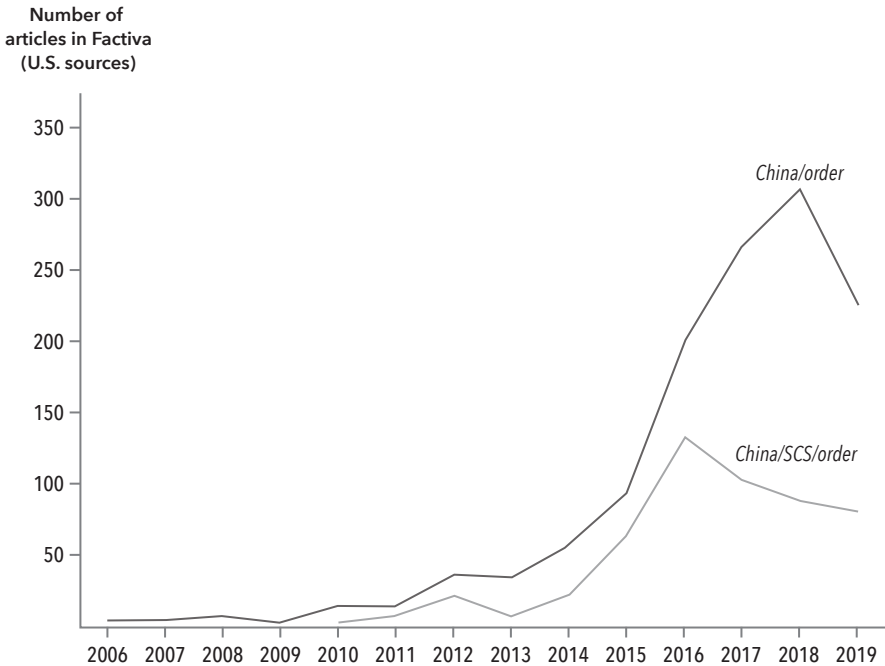
Elite Discourse

One of the most common terms in the discourse of China's rise in the United States is the "rules-based" order. Specifically, various aspects of China's behavior are described as challenging the rules-based order created by the United States after the end of World War II. In Asia, this order has been sustained by American military and, especially, naval power. In the maritime domain, these rules involve core elements of what the US views as customary international law, particularly freedom of navigation for military and commercial vessels. Thus, as Chair of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford concluded in 2018, "In China, what we are talking about is an erosion of the rules-based order. The United States and its allies share the commitment to a free and open Pacific. That is going to require coherent, collective action."³⁸

In the Asian context, the notion of a rules-based order was perhaps first mentioned in 2011, by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In "America's Pacific Century," her *Foreign Policy* article launching the policy of rebalancing to Asia, Clinton wrote: "We are asking these emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order." Although her article did not emphasize the SCS disputes, the link to it was clear—referring, for example, to "the key international rules for defining territorial claims in the South China Sea's waters."³⁹

As shown in figure 5-1, China's behavior in the SCS appears to have been central to the framing, in the United States, of China's rise as a challenge to the US-led rules-based order. The data comes from the

FIGURE 5-1. China, South China Sea, and Rules-Based or Liberal Order



“US sources” section in the Factiva database, which draws from key newspapers and news-related websites. As figure 5-1 shows, between 2012 and 2016, the majority of articles including the terms “China” and the rules-based or liberal “order” also included a reference to the “South China Sea.” Thus, at face value, this figure suggests that China’s behavior in the SCS played a central role in shaping American elite perceptions of China’s intentions, which were increasingly framed not just as a challenge to regional stability but to something even more important—the basis of the existing order in the region. The number of articles mentioning both the rules-based order and the SCS begins to decline in 2017 when compared to those that mention only China and the rules-based order. Nevertheless, this does not undercut the role of the SCS in framing how the China challenge was described in US news sources. Instead, it may reflect less media attention to the SCS, which paradoxically had been more stable from 2017 to 2019 than in the preceding five years dominated by the Scarborough Shoal stand-

off, China's land reclamation, and the international arbitration case. It may also reflect the growing prominence of trade, human rights, and other issues in US-China relations relative to the SCS.

A similar story about the role of the South China Sea in shaping American perceptions can be told using slightly different terms. As shown in figure 5-2, using the same subset of US news sources from Factiva, articles with the terms China, South China Sea, and expansion also grew steadily during this time period. As shown in figure 5-3, articles with the terms China, South China Sea, and revisionist/revisionism also increased during this period.

Examples of elite views of China's actions in the South China Sea as a challenge to the underlying regional order are not hard to find. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2017, for example, Ely Ratner concludes, "China has begun to assert its claims more vigorously and is now poised to seize control of the sea. Should it succeed, it would deal a devastating blow to the United States' influence in the region, tilt-

FIGURE 5-2. China, South China Sea, and Expansionism or Expansionist

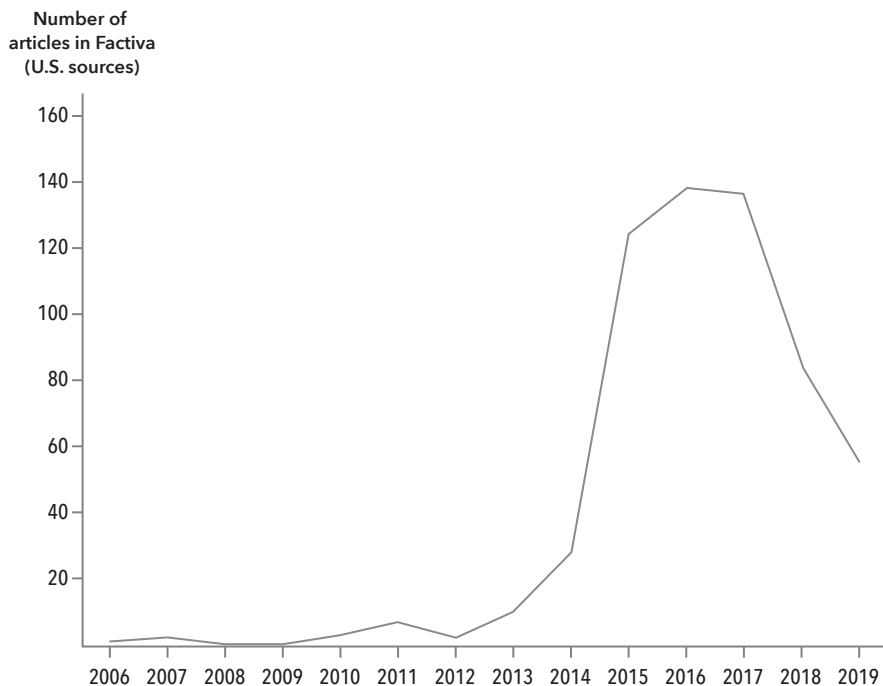
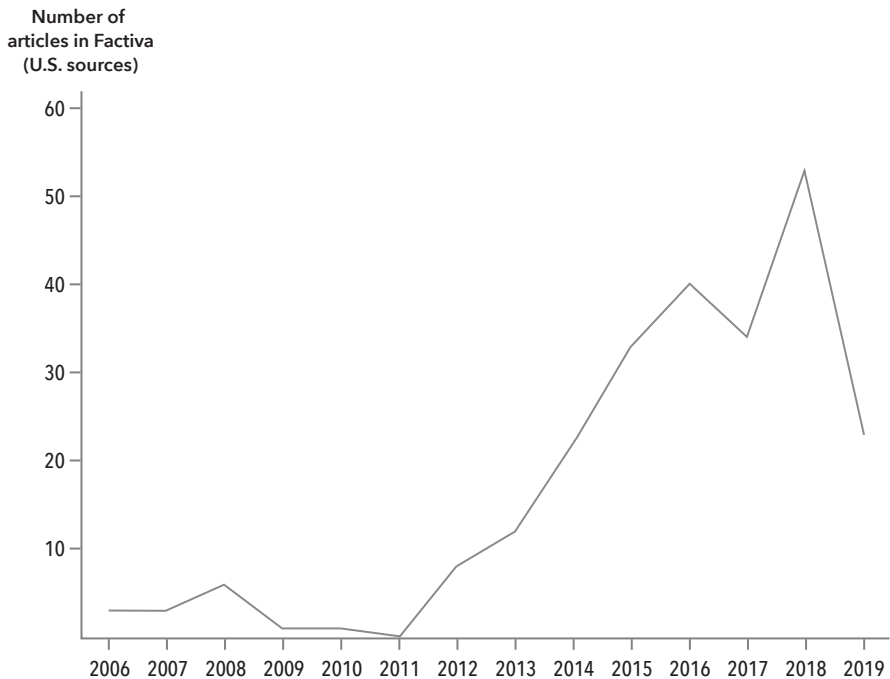


FIGURE 5-3. China, South China Sea, and Revisionism or Revisionist

ing the balance of power across Asia in China's favor."⁴⁰ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper reach a similar conclusion in 2018. For Brands and Cooper, "from a geopolitical perspective, the stakes are high indeed in the South China Sea." Why? "America's standing in the Asia-Pacific is largely dependent on its ability to uphold existing rules of the road, such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, and face down challenges to the region's stability and order, as well as its openness. Thus, permitting Chinese control over a critical part of a critical region would represent a major strategic setback for the United States." Moreover, "it would signal to regional observers that Washington no longer can play its traditional role in the Asia-Pacific."⁴¹ Bonnie Glaser and Greg Poling from CSIS offer a final example: "If Vietnam and the Philippines are forced to undertake joint development and give up their exclusive rights, it would deal a heavy blow to the rules-based order, and to U.S. credibility as a protector of that order."⁴²

Thus, at an aggregate level, US views of China in the SCS have moved from viewing the dispute as a source of instability among the

claimants—and thus a problem to be managed—to a challenge to the regional and global order that requires a much more significant response from the United States.

China and the South China Sea in US Official Statements

Consistent with the general trends just described, statements from various elements of the US government have hardened regarding China and the SCS. In his February 2014 congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel attributed regional instability to China's effort "to assert control over the area contained in the so-called 'nine-dashed line,'" which he described as "inconsistent with international law."⁴³ Russel's remarks foreshadowed a growing prevalence of similar statements made by other senior officials. In most cases, the Chinese actions shaping these views include the failure to clarify the meaning of the "nine-dashed line," the land reclamation and subsequent build-up of military installations on these artificial islands, and the rejection of the arbitral tribunal established under UNCLOS to hear the complaint filed by the Philippines.

The director of National Intelligence's national threat assessments reflect the shift in focus on the SCS. When introducing the 2015 assessment, James Clapper described China's island building as "part of an aggressive military modernization program directly aimed at what they consider our strengths."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the 2015 assessment and those for the next several years largely identified China's "firm stance on its sovereignty claims" as part of its "active foreign policy," not behavior with broader implications for the regional order or the US position in that order.⁴⁵

By 2019, however, the assessment of the US intelligence community had hardened. The 2019 threat assessment concluded that "China will continue increasing its maritime presence in the South China Sea and building military and dual-use infrastructure in the Spratly Islands to improve its ability to control access, project power, and undermine US influence in the area." Furthermore, China seeks to "compel Southeast Asian claimants to acquiesce in China's claims—at least tacitly—and bolster Beijing's narrative in the region that the United States is in decline and China's preeminence is inevitable."⁴⁶ When introducing the testimony, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats further

emphasized the implications for the regional order, noting that China “will attempt to further solidify and increase its control within its immediate sphere of influence in the South China Sea and its global presence farther abroad.”⁴⁷ Thus, China in the SCS now created a question about the broader order in the region, and was not just a source of regional instability.

The annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore offers an opportunity for US defense secretaries to comment on security trends in the region and US policy. Here, too, one can see a change in how the US views the SCS disputes and their implications for the United States. In 2014, Chuck Hagel drew a clear link between Chinese actions in the South China Sea and the international order. In reference to restrictions on maritime navigation, Hagel said, “The United States will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Hagel did not emphasize the issue. In 2015, Ash Carter, referring to China’s “actions in the South China Sea,” concluded that “China is out of step with both the international rules and norms that underscore the Asia-Pacific security architecture.” Carter also underscored that the United States “will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows.”⁴⁹ In 2017, James Mattis presaged some of the conclusions in the NSS released later that year when he said that “we cannot accept Chinese actions that impinge on the interests of the international community, undermining the rules-based order.”⁵⁰

An important voice in shaping US government views was Admiral Harry Harris, head of Pacific Command (PACOM, now INDOPACOM). In March 2015, shortly before becoming PACOM commander, Harris described China’s land reclamations as a “great wall of sand” that raised “serious questions about Chinese intentions.”⁵¹ In November 2015, speaking at the Halifax Forum in Canada, Harris linked China’s behavior to the international order: “We will not give China—or any nation—a free pass to fray the rules-based security architecture that has benefited all of us, including China.”⁵² In 2017, Harris elaborated on these ideas. In April, at a speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, Harris also foreshadowed the NSS by stating that “we are in strategic competition with China. Let’s acknowledge this situation and deal with China realistically—as it is.”⁵³ That October, Harris described China’s actions in the SCS, especially the land reclamation and buildup of artificial islands, as “using its military and economic

power to erode the rules-based international order,” a theme he would repeat in speeches and testimony over the next year.⁵⁴

Finally, in national-level documents, a sharp contrast is evident. The Obama administration’s 2015 NSS was premised on building a “constructive relationship” with China. Although competition was acknowledged, it was not described as either strategic or inevitable. The SCS disputes were mentioned, but not in the context of broader Chinese intentions. By contrast, the Trump administration’s 2017 NSS identified strategic competition with “revisionist powers,” especially China and Russia, as its focus. As noted earlier, the strategy concluded that “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region . . . and reorder the region in its favor.”⁵⁵ In the section on China, maritime disputes, especially in the SCS, featured prominently as evidence to support this assessment about China’s intentions and the imperative of strategic competition.⁵⁶

The National Defense Strategy issued in early 2018 does not refer to the South China Sea. Nevertheless, based in part on China’s military modernization in the SCS, the report concludes that “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage.” Moreover, perhaps extending judgments in the NSS, the document concluded that the goal of China’s military modernization was “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”⁵⁷

CHINA RESPONDS TO US BEHAVIOR (2014–2020)

From 2014 onward, Chinese experts have paid close attention to official and unofficial narratives in the US about the threat China poses to the regional order. As analyst Jia Xiudong contends, the concept of the “rules-based order” has been “appropriated by the US as a convenient tool to criticize China.”⁵⁸ Policy elites within China see the US as using these narratives to justify its involvement in the SCS—particularly its opposition to China’s land reclamation activities, public FONOPs, and support for the Philippines’ arbitration lawsuit against China—to preserve its leadership position in the region.

Chinese policy elites generally view the United States as being

overly concerned about the potential for China's construction of military facilities on disputed land features to "crowd out" US military power.⁵⁹ Although scholar Zhu Feng acknowledges that the United States sees China's land reclamation "as a reflection of China's ambition,"⁶⁰ the Chinese expert community is largely dismissive of the actual threat posed by China's land reclamation activities. As such, Chinese elites see the US as deliberately exaggerating the danger of China's land reclamation, which they view as a manifestation of the United States' intention to contain China. For example, analysts have described Admiral Philip Davidson's April 2018 comments on China's reclamation activities before the Senate Armed Services Committee—in which he declared China to be "capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war"—as part of a scheme to lay the groundwork for domestic public support for the US efforts to militarize the region.⁶¹ Zhu also notes that the United States, through its "vicious remarks" about China's land reclamation activities, has strategically inflated regional concerns to diplomatically contain and isolate China.⁶² As analyst Zhang Wenzong has similarly observed, the United States has used the issue to diplomatically isolate China by lodging accusations in public, multilateral formats, including the G-7 and Shangri-La Dialogue.⁶³

Chinese observers are also skeptical of the United States's "so-called concern" about freedom of navigation, which they view as an excuse to militarize the SCS through the deployment of warships and aircraft.⁶⁴ According to Wang Zaibang, vice president of a research institute affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, the United States has responded to China's land reclamation with increased FONOPs to "regain 'face' before the international community."⁶⁵ FONOPs, as Zhang Wenzong notes, are an attempt "to make China pay a greater diplomatic and strategic price [for land reclamation]."⁶⁶ Noting with concern that the US has, since 2015, increased the frequency of its FONOPs in the SCS, analyst Li Yan suggests that how the United States deals with China on freedom of navigation issues "will be a litmus test for how it will deal with China's rise."⁶⁷ Xue Li and Xu Yanzhuo, scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), argue that the United States's FONOPs have "deliberately humiliated China" and point specifically to the unapproved transit of the USS *Lawrence* and the USS *Curtis* within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied outposts.⁶⁸ More recently, in response to US accusations that China

has used the COVID-19 pandemic to expand its SCS presence, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his May 2020 press conference, described FONOPs as “ill-intentioned and despicable moves” that “are meant to sow discords between China and the ASEAN countries and undermine the hard-won stability in the region.”⁶⁹

In a November 2015 speech, Xi Jinping linked events in the South China Sea with relations with major powers. Specifically, Xi described “some Western countries” as “plotting to block our country’s development,” noting that they seek to “join hands to tie down and contain our country.” The main example Xi mentioned was the US’s “vigorous pursuit” of a strategy of rebalancing and use of “so-called ‘freedom of navigation’ to pressure China again and again in the South China Sea,” including operations in China’s territorial sea and airspace.⁷⁰ Thus, for Xi, US involvement in the SCS was not limited to preserving certain navigational freedoms or norms of conflict resolution, but also to containing China’s broader international rise.

Chinese analysts have also called attention to Washington’s efforts to strengthen the US-led regional order by seeking to undermine the legitimacy of China’s SCS sovereignty claims. They point to Daniel Russel’s February 2014 testimony before Congress,⁷¹ which preceded a State Department report later that year, both of which questioned the legitimacy of the nine-dashed line and declared China’s claims to historic rights invalid.⁷² According to Ni Feng, a professor at CASS, Russel’s remarks marked a shift in the United States’ SCS policy, from “behind-the-scenes involvement to center stage involvement,” with the United States taking an increasingly public position against China’s claims.⁷³

For China, the most serious effort by the US to delegitimize China’s SCS claims was its support for the Philippines’ decision in January 2013 to initiate a case against China under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea’s dispute settlement provisions.⁷⁴ According to analyst Cao Qun, the Philippines filed its claim against China to win international backing, which Manila felt it needed following its forced retreat from the Scarborough Shoal in 2012.⁷⁵ In July 2016, the arbitral tribunal ruled that China’s claim to historic rights within the nine-dashed line lacks any legal basis and China’s activities in the Philippines’ EEZ, including some of the land reclamation in the Spratlys, violates the Philippines’ sovereign rights.⁷⁶ China declared the ruling “null and void.”⁷⁷ Shi Yongmin, a research fellow at an institute affiliated with

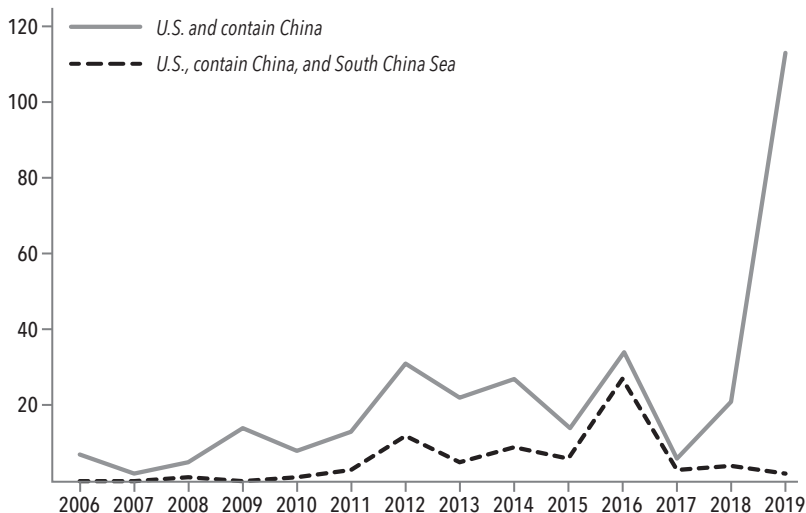
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, highlights US involvement in the arbitration as a key factor responsible for turning the SCS dispute from a contest over rights and interests into one over the regional order.⁷⁸ Attributing the outcome to US meddling, Shi points to the US decision to deploy two aircraft carrier groups to the SCS ahead of the verdict, which he describes as a “typical action to influence the process of the Arbitral Tribunal.”⁷⁹ Other scholars have similarly likened the ruling to a “political farce under the cloak of law,” a view echoed by Chinese state media, and warned that the US would use China’s compliance with the ruling “as an indicator of whether China will comply with international law more broadly.”⁸⁰

In July 2020, on the fourth anniversary of the UNCLOS ruling, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement “aligning the US position on the PRC’s maritime claims in the SCS with the Tribunal’s decision.” The statement also declared that “Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them.”⁸¹ While the statement did not signal a shift away from the official US policy of neutrality on questions of territorial sovereignty in the SCS, Chinese official responses to the statement reflect a deepening suspicion about the purported effort by the US to use the ruling to delegitimize China’s claims and efforts to protect them. Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded by accusing the US of going “to great lengths to stoke trouble and sow discord between China and other regional claimants.”⁸² The statement, as well as the subsequent decision by the US to sanction Chinese companies for their role in land reclamation activities,⁸³ have further reinforced the view in China, articulated by Zhao, that the US “wishes nothing but chaos in the South China Sea so that it can gain from the muddied waters.”⁸⁴

From China’s perspective, the United States characterizes China as a violator of international law and the “rules-based” order because it seeks to justify its increased involvement in the SCS, which ultimately serves its larger goals of containing China and preserving regional hegemony. As shown in figure 5-4, US involvement in the South China Sea has featured prominently in Chinese party-controlled media discourse about US intentions to contain China’s rise. For data, we drew on Chinese language databases for the *Renmin Ribao* (*People’s Daily*) and *Jiefangjun Bao* (*People’s Liberation Army Daily*), the flagship newspa-

FIGURE 5-4. US, “Contain China,” and the South China Sea

Number of
articles in *Renmin Ribao*
and *Jiefangjun Bao*



pers of the Chinese Communist Party and military. Almost every year since 2012, at least a third of the articles that mention the US and the phrase “contain China” have also referenced the SCS, with nearly 80 percent of such articles referencing the SCS in 2016. Newspaper coverage during this period highlights the importance of the SCS disputes in helping to establish a narrative of US containment, even though this narrative’s exponential growth in 2019 was fueled primarily by other disputes in the bilateral relationship, such as the trade war and US criticism of China’s policies toward Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

The State Council Information Office’s two most recent White Papers on national defense, released in 2015 and 2019, also reflect how China’s perception of the US role in its maritime disputes has hardened over the last several years. The 2015 White Paper identifies maritime neighbors that “take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China’s reefs and islands” as a key threat to China’s sovereignty and rights. It goes on to note that “some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs,” and that a “tiny few” conduct close-in reconnaissance against China.⁸⁵ Yet the document refrains from identifying the United States as a threat.

In contrast, the 2019 White Paper regards states “from outside the region” as primarily responsible for “undermining China’s national security.”⁸⁶ The document implicitly casts the US in particular as the main threat to China’s maritime rights in the SCS and censures the US for having “provoked and intensified competition among major countries.”⁸⁷ At the same time, however, the White Paper describes the situation in the SCS as “generally stable” and praises regional states for “properly managing risks and differences.”⁸⁸ Other claimants, especially the Philippines and Vietnam, are mentioned only in the context of defense exchanges and cooperation. Chinese scholars have attributed this easing of tensions with neighboring states to the decline of US strategic credibility under the Trump administration. Sun Xuefeng and Zhang Xikun note that the unpredictability of the Trump administration’s foreign policies have provided a “timely opportunity for better relations between China and its neighbors,”⁸⁹ even as the SCS disputes have remained a key source of tension between China and the United States.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, the role of the South China Sea in US-China relations has grown. The ongoing power transition has fueled tensions over the South China Sea disputes, heightening the stakes for each of strategic competition in the region. Bilateral tensions in the SCS have been on the rise for much of the last decade, since regional concerns about Chinese assertiveness prompted greater US involvement, which in turn led China to push back. However, as spiraling competition since the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident reveals, the United States and China appear to have reached a turning point, with the SCS issue now capable of destabilizing the entire bilateral relationship. As this examination of US and Chinese views shows, the disputes have expanded from a contest over sovereign rights to a contest over the regional and international order. Both the United States and China now view what the other does in the SCS as an indicator of the other’s broader intentions. The United States, for example, perceives China’s land reclamation and refusal to comply with the 2016 UNCLOS ruling as evidence that China has expansionist ambitions and seeks to overturn the rules-based order. Meanwhile, Beijing sees US FONOPs and

increased security cooperation with other claimant states as evidence of a larger US effort to contain a rising China.

The finding that the United States and China have reached a turning point in the SCS has several important implications. First, the tendency of both the United States and China to make broad strategic judgments based on interactions in the SCS carries the risk that each power will draw the wrong conclusions about the other's intentions. If the two powers remain caught in an action-reaction cycle in the SCS, future interactions will only harden perceptions of each other as clear adversaries in this issue. Because both countries use the SCS as a barometer for the larger bilateral relationship, hardened perceptions of each other in the SCS will inevitably fuel adversarial perceptions and dynamics in other issues.

Second, the findings suggest that unresolved territorial and sovereignty disputes can heighten the peril associated with power transitions.⁹⁰ As this chapter shows, China's efforts to strengthen its sovereignty claims are perceived as threats to US interest in freedom of navigation and a rules-based order. At the same time, US involvement in the South China Sea, motivated by concerns about freedom of navigation and the regional order, is seen by China as a challenge to its sovereignty claims, prompting China to take further measures to bolster its position. These already dangerous security dilemma-like dynamics are further accelerated by the ongoing power transition. Whereas the United States sees China's behavior in the SCS as emblematic of a revisionist rising power, China attributes US behavior to the desire of a declining power to preserve its hegemony. As US-China competition in the SCS reveals, this combination of a dispute over sovereignty and contention over the regional and international order is particularly toxic, as it reinforces threat perceptions and increases the potential for action-reaction dynamics to escalate.

Notes

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81. Michael R. Pompeo, "US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," US Department of State, July 13, 2020, www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/.

82. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 14, 2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 14, 2020, fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1797731.shtml; See also, "Remarks by Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy on the Statement of the US Department of State on the South China Sea," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, July 14, 2020, www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxss/t1797515.htm.

83. "US Penalizes 24 Chinese Companies Over Role in South China Sea," *New York Times*, August 26, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/business/economy/trump-sanctions-south-china-sea.html.

84. *Ibid.*

85. "China's Military Strategy," State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 27, 2015, p. 2, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

87. "China's National Defense in the New Era," State Council of the People's Republic of China, July 24, 2019, p. 4, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

88. "China's National Defense in the New Era," State Council of the People's Republic of China, July 24, 2019, p. 4, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

89. Sun Xuefeng and Zhang Xikun, "China and US Strategic Choices and China's Relations with Its Neighbors," *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 5 (2019), pp. 40, 44.

90. We explore these ideas in "Perfect Storm: Power Transitions and Territorial Disputes," unpublished manuscript, March 2020.