

The South China Sea Dispute: China's Challenge to US Hegemony

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Following the collapse of the USSR towards the end of the 20th century, the international system transferred from a world order characterized by bipolar competition between two opposing superpowers to one of unipolar hegemony dominated by the United States. However, this has been accompanied by protracted debates over the durability of American hegemony. During the 1990s, the United States' technological, economic, and military superiority was unrivaled, and many believed it would be a long time before the country's global leadership

was challenged. However, now in 2022, new evidence suggests that this was not the case and that the era of American primacy is coming to an end, owing largely to the rise of the People's Republic of China. As China advances toward becoming a major superpower, it challenges US hegemony, particularly in continental Asia and the Asia-Pacific. This conflict is typified in the South China Sea, a marginal sea that is part of the Pacific Ocean and covers an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers. Despite its relatively small geographical area, it has in the past decade remained a considerable interest to the



world's superpowers. This has been due to a multitude of reasons, including its strategic positioning with one-third of the world's shipping passing through the region each year and its holdings of huge untapped gas and oil reserves.

At first glance, the disputes in the South China Sea involving China and its neighbors appear to be disagreements between distant nations with little significance to the United States. However, America has several interests (geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic) that give it good reason to hold a stake in this dispute. The United States has made public statements regarding its official South China Sea policy. It believes that the People's Republic of China has no right to lawfully assert a maritime claim and that the country's constant harassment of fisheries and offshore energy development in the area to exploit resources are markedly illegal. More specifically, the United States rejects China's claims of the 12 nautical mile territorial sea radius surrounding its claims on the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands are hotly contested by countries in the region, and give China rights to prime holdings in the center of the South China Sea, but the United States and others believe China lacks any lawful claim to the islands. To even a congressional level, America has made clear that its support of international freedom rejects any unrightful (or expansionary) acts in the South China Sea.

However, I argue that long-term geographic power in the South China Sea is the driving force behind the United States' interest in the region itself. Whoever controls the South China Sea will have permanent geographic power, an essential component of any state's foreign policy. The United States understands the historical significance of its dominance over the American continent in its rise to superpower status: that is how it imposed itself and ended European hegemony on the continent. Likewise, in its geopolitical competition against China, the US cannot allow China to pursue the same goals and achieve the same outcomes as the Monroe Doctrine. Antonio Gramsci's revolutionary thesis of cultural hegemony posits that the United States must contain China's ambitions in order to maintain its own position; and, if "containment" is not implemented, the region will likely witness a gradual transition of power. Thus, whether it is injecting weakness, delaying China's development, preventing the formation of a global center of power, or being part of a revisionist policy to change the world to its image, the end goal of the United States' revisionist policy is to prevent a regional power transition process. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the failure of the containment policy is the greatest risk of the South China Sea dispute. If the US fails, we will witness an immediate power transition, increasing the risk of falling headfirst into a Thucydides trap (the claim that the war between Athens and Sparta was attributable to the rise of one great power and the fall of another).

Since the Obama Administration's 'pivot' towards Asia in 2011, the United States has been shifting its policy stances. Speaking for the country, former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton called for an "increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and

otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region,” which was interpreted as a response to China’s growing expansion. One particular aspect of this has been the freedom of navigation operations led by the US Navy: supplying arms to rim states in the South China Sea (such as Vietnam) with military and lethal aid and patrolling near the artificial islands created by China in the disputed Spratly archipelago. The United States affecting its policy of containment in the South China Sea has by far been one of its most important in our world today. Failing to do so against China would have immense implications on global politics and society in the near future, as its stance in the region would give it both the economic and geopolitical power needed to rise to the dominant world power. As a result, to the United States, it is believed that it must not only impose a strategy to maintain its current position, but it must also succeed.

In many ways, China’s rise in an American-led global system has precipitated the US-China power shift. In retrospect, the power transition began in 1978, when China embarked on a modernization strategy. Signs of China's rise drew global attention in the early 1990s, and its growth accelerated in the early 2000s. Massive changes occurred, and the China threat emerged, overshadowing China’s relations with the rest of the world. China had never contributed to the establishment of the current global order; instead, it had sought its demise for decades prior to 1978. China had no way of challenging the American-led order at the time. Instead, it was forced to become a part of this system, especially in terms of economic development. Leaving aside China’s recent misfortunes, the country has a rich sociopolitical, strategic, and cultural history. However, China’s rise has been governed by an authoritarian regime that rejects globally shared democratic ideologies.

China’s ability to install a challenge in the South China Sea could signal a shift in the global hegemonic order rather than merely a rise in influence in neighboring Asian regions. If China successfully establishes its influence and shapes events in the South China Sea, it will mark a significant step up the hierarchical ladder. In this sense, both powers are expected to defend their respective interests. Gramsci’s theory predicts an increase in the likelihood of conflict, with China becoming more confident and assertive and the US becoming more nervous after losing the economic battle, as China is expected to surpass US GDP by 2030. The power transition between the United States and China differs significantly from previous transitions. While there is no clear guide for the US and China in the unfolding events, many changes are expected, particularly in the South China Sea. As a result, while China's ultimate success in modernizing its economy and military is not guaranteed, the likelihood of success is increasing. So, the high probability of China’s success in achieving most of its development goals by 2050 remains high, signaling the end of an old world order and the beginning of a new one.

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