

**US-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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**Annotation:**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the conditions, causes, manifestations, and prospects of US-China rivalry in the South China Sea. In the second decade of the 21st century, this body of water continues to be a hot spot. This "hotbed of tension" in Southeast Asia has simmered for decades at a low temperature, occasionally escalating into armed confrontation.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, USA, China, rivalry, geopolitics.

**Introduction**

Why has the South China Sea become such a contentious issue in US-China relations? First, China's maritime interests are growing, and Beijing's economic influence and military might are expanding. These vast resources provide China with the ability to assert its claims to the region from a position of far greater strength vis-à-vis the United States and other states. Consequently, Beijing has become much more assertive in the South China Sea and elsewhere in recent years. However, few expected the South China Sea to become a focal point of US-China rivalry. At first glance, the South China Sea should not be as important to China as the Taiwan Strait or the Korean Peninsula.

China has long favored a restrained approach to the South China Sea. Over the decades, this approach has contributed to the disarmament of other claimants and the United States. At the same time, China has intensified its harassment of fishing vessels and maritime law enforcement vessels of other states. However, since at least 2013, China has invested more time, energy and resources in the South China Sea.

The United States and China have not faced each other on the battlefield since 1953, and since 1972, they have interacted through expanding economic and diplomatic contacts. However, numerous disputes have arisen, along with significant policy differences, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a series of political and military crises occurred, each raising the specter of escalation to the use of military force. However, the United States and China continue to cooperate on many issues and generally maintain a working relationship. However, mutual distrust and hostility permeate the bilateral relationship, and Washington and Beijing perceive each other as rivals.

The rivalry between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region is determined by geography. Of course, this platitude requires clarification. Robert Ross has argued that China is primarily a land-based power, while the United States is primarily a maritime one.

Consequently, he argues that their rivalry is more stable. Ross emphasizes that the "geography of peace" will likely prevail [1]. According to Ross, "The post-Cold War bipolar regional structure is characterized by Chinese dominance in continental East Asia and US dominance in maritime East Asia" [2]. Ross explains that at the turn of the century, "China dominates continental Southeast Asia," while "the US Navy dominates maritime Southeast Asia" [3]. However, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, competition between the United States and China has intensified in the Western Pacific, with the South China Sea becoming a focal point. A new geography of conflict is emerging as China becomes a major maritime power. Indeed, Ross notes that "China can only destabilize the bipolar structure by challenging US maritime primacy" [4].

Beijing has focused significant resources on expanding China's maritime capabilities [5]. Rivalry has intensified as US global hegemony in the post-Cold War era challenges China.

So, why have tensions in the South China Sea increased? First, there is a trend toward continental thinking, which stems from the work of Halford Mackinder. Scholars such as Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasize the Eurasian landmass and focus their attention on the geostrategic importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus, building on Mackinder's "heartland" [6]. In previous "hot wars," including World War I and World War II, the fighting was most brutally fought in continental battles and land campaigns in Europe. The shackles of the Cold War proved too heavy for Washington, and the Pentagon struggled for decades to understand a new world map without the Soviet Union and without the specter of a major land war on the European continent.

Meanwhile, China focused on modernizing its military and paramilitary forces, with a particular emphasis on its maritime forces. Of course, the United States did not ignore its naval forces, but the speed with which the capabilities of all services of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began to approach those of the US military was dramatic. The introduction of "Area Denial" (A2/AD) into the Pentagon's lexicon is evidence of Washington's recognition of the new strategic reality in the Western Pacific. A2/AD refers to the increasing ability of China's military to threaten US military forces operating in the Western Pacific. Moreover, the Pentagon has recently begun to discuss the need to pursue a "Third Offset Strategy" to address the complex challenges facing the United States, as stated by various potential adversaries [7]. The emphasis of the Third Offset Strategy is to leverage US technological advantages to counter the increasingly powerful conventional military capabilities being developed and deployed in large numbers by other countries, particularly China. However, unlike the shifts of the 1950s and 1970s, there is no single adversary, and this solution does not require a greater focus on nuclear weapons. While Beijing is certainly the primary concern for the United States, it is not the only challenge Washington faces. The Third Shift Strategy emphasizes

technological advances in the maritime and air domains, with a particular focus on countering adversarial precision weapons.

Strategic studies pay close attention to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea [8]. Robert Kaplan has emphasized the importance of the global ocean system in geopolitics. While the world's oceans have long played a key role in geopolitics, their importance has only increased as a result of the expansion of shipping. This underscores the importance of the South China Sea, which is traversed by some of the busiest shipping lanes anywhere on the planet.

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