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Power Transition in the South China Sea Challenges for Regional Peace

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ABSTRACT

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The South China Sea is a contested region between China and different smaller states (Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei) of the Asia Pacific region. The United States is acting as a balancer by supporting smaller nations against assertive Chinese policies. Moreover, the United States has a military presence in the region. According to the US, it has a military presence to protect its allies and freedom of navigation. China considers these US designs as a threat to its interest in the region. The United State who was once considered the sole superpower in the world is now challenged by China in the South China Sea. Power Transition theory explains if the emerging superpower does not follow the rules established by the existing superpower then the conflict is inevitable. As China is building artificial islands, it could invite a strong response from the United States that could eventually lead to a major conflict. This Study analyzes the conflict in the South China Sea by using the lens of Power Transition Theory.

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Introduction

Geographically, the South China Sea is located between Malacca and Karimata straits and the strait of Taiwan (Mehboob, 2018). The region has been permanently remained an element of rivalries for vigilant powers due to the region's enigmatic and baffling nature and hydrocarbon reservoirs. Generally, The United States has always supported free access to the market and freedom of navigation. This US policy is also reflected in the case of the South China Sea (James Dobbins, 2017). Since, the episode of 9/11, the U.S remained preoccupied with the issues in Iraq, Afghanistan Syria, Ukraine, Iran, and North Korea. In that period the Chinese fully enjoyed the expansionist policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Many disputed and artificially constructed islands were put on the Chinese state sovereignty list (Hamzah, 2016). On the contrary, Washington witnessed the lack of policy consistency, firmness, and coherence in containing the Chinese surge in the Asia Pacific (Bouchat, 2017).

The ambiance of despondency reached 'it's' heights when Hillary Clinton, the then Secretary of State gave remarks at ASEAN regional organization, which was convened in Hanoi 2010, embarked on an offensive US strategy regarding the Asia-Pacific region at-large. She stated, "The U.S. supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion. We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant" (Chang, 2010). Clearly, the move was intended to give China a strong message. Yang Jiechi, Chinese Foreign Minister, immediately reacted and equates the comments as "an attack on China". President Barak Obama's 'Asia Pivot Policy' 2011, which aimed at containing the Chinese

surge, is the link of the same chain. Since then, in the South China Sea, the U.S has used a huge plethora of carrot and stick to retain and revive Washington's primacy (Bouchat, 2017).

The Incident of "Scarborough Shoal" occurred in 2012, remained a three-month-long standoff between the Philippines and China, completely shifted the South China Sea dynamics (Zappone, 2015). In 2014, the US renegotiated a defense pact (Extended Defense Cooperation Agreement) with Philippine President Benigno Aquino which gave accessibility to five military bases in the latter country in times of emergency. Similarly, in March 2016, U.S openly denounced Chinese claims and deployed naval warships in the South China Sea which includes aircraft carrier John Stennis, two destroyers, and two cruisers. However, the US policy of manifestation of power projection was aimed to challenge the supremacy of the Chinese brown water navy in the Asia Pacific region (Staff, 2016).

Regional tension rises to new heights especially after August 2018, when US armada warships movements in the South China Sea near Japan coast risked Sino-Japanese fury (Pickrell, 2018). The US-Japanese naval exercise which was later joined by the British and France as well in the Asia Pacific region inflamed the new dilemma of the Trade War. The verbal-fight between Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi remained for a while. Resultantly, the U.S placed crippling tariffs of 25 percent worth \$200 billion Chinese goods imports. In response, the Chinese government placed retaliatory tariffs on US goods worth \$60 billion which contain aircraft and liquefied natural gas (Pramuk, 2019).

By and large, the South China Sea prevailing rivalry has much capacity of igniting another Cold War between hegemonic competitors i.e. the United States and China. The South China Sea became a center of attention for the world because it is demanded by a country like China, which is considered the upcoming superpower by many researchers. Many authors are not convinced by the idea that the Cold war is over, but they consider the Cold war is still there. Many authors even maintain that a "second Cold War has been informally started after the end of the first Cold War and this Cold war is being played by the U.S and China" (Mughal, Second Cold War, 2017). In this Cold War, Southeast Asia is considered the epicenter of the emerging Cold War. China is the second-biggest economy solely because of its huge exports and its huge trade is being done via Sea in the backyard. The United States is backing small countries in Southeast Asia for containing the Chinese economic surge which surely will be the next hegemon not only at the regional level but in the international arena as well (Beeson, 2015).

Conflicts in the South China Sea

The South China Sea has been a cause of disagreement between many states for the last sixty years. There are more than one hundred Islets in the South China Sea. The most disputed Islands are Macclesfield bank, Parcels Islands, Scarborough Shoal, Prata Islands, and the Spratly Islands. There are six South Eastern states in the area, which have different claims with historical proofs on these Islands. The skirmish over Paracel and Spratly are protuberant in the 21st century (US-DOD, 2015).

Vietnam, Taiwan, and China have claimed the Paracel Islands. Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and China are contesting the Spratly Islands and other islets. China Claims that it had dominion over these islands archaeologically, but Vietnam discharges this idea (Goldstein, 2018). China is using a separation line like a U shape rottenly called 9 Dash Line which has triggered all other states near the South China Sea and they started challenging this line. China claims its sovereignty over approximately the whole region of the South China Sea and hoping that it could one day grasp who may transport its busy seaways (sails, 2015). In response, US defense secretary, at the Singapore Summit, Ashton Carter strained to stop seizures of land in the South China Sea by China and other states, China pulls rank it. Carter vowed to withstand US aircraft and warships in the global waters (Benner, 2015).

Philippine presents the reason for proximate to Spratly islands as propinquity of State jurisdiction in the region. Spratly Island is 100 miles from the Philippines and 500 miles from China. Malaysia also claims a small number of Isles in Spratly. Thus, the main protagonist of the battle in the South China Sea is Beijing (O'Rourke, 2019). The isles situated in the South China Sea are strategically significant for China to gratify its ultimate objectives of achieving omnipotence in the world. According to Carter "it is unclear how much farther China will go," (Benner, 2015). The US' struggle has many directions i.e. to deal with Beijing and to support Taiwan and the Philippines in their cause in the South China Sea.

The balancing act in the area has become a colossal job for Washington. A straight fight between Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea can be alarming for the whole world. The US will not endure soundlessly when Taiwan and the Philippines are antagonizing Beijing in the South China Sea. Similarly, China is not horrendous in combating a war against Washington in the South China Sea (Phillips, 2015). Beijing is more organized to face gigantic challenges and it is in temperament to reply to the superpower of the time. A Chinese newspaper, *The Global Times*, foretold in this way “If the US bottom line is that China has to halt its activities, then a US-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea” (Benner, 2015). However, the struggle in the South China Sea is a skirmish limited to a specific area but it can affect the whole world. China is the succeeding largest economy of the world and it has converted a challenger for the superiority of Washington in many regions of the world. This struggle has taken the form of a Second Cold War. Washington is assisting her allies that are convoluted in this conflict to attain her anticipated objectives in the South China Sea (Lamothe, 2016).

Taiwan has been a cause of disagreement between Washington and Beijing in the past. America has buttressed Taiwan many times in the past and present which is facilitating the later claim on the isles in the South China Sea. American collaboration with Taiwan is meant to pawn the increasing influence of China in the region. Philippine is yet another friend of Washington in the South China Sea which has been acting the same way as Taiwan i.e. the South China Sea claims on the cost of containing Chinese rising role (Department of Defense, December 31, 2018). Philippine is one of the utmost aid takers of the US and it is prepared to work for the wellbeing of the US in this region. If China challenges the Philippines and Taiwan, then it merely means the former and the US are fighting a Second Cold War in this region. In this way, the South China Sea battle indirectly shows a fight between China and the US (Department of Defense, December 31, 2018).

Theoretical Understanding of the Study

Economic bonhomie was considered the basic ingredient of hegemony at a multi-polar international political setup. However, the age of globalization overruled the geo-economic factor and placed geo-political and strategic indicators state(s) top priorities in the 21st century (Beeson, 2015). The pivotal role of maritime and ocean resources is an undeniable fact which set the stage for hegemony in the international political arena. In this regard, the region of the South China Sea is the central theater for great powers' antagonism (Breslin, 2010).

There is no denial of the fact that the Chinese determination to stamp its influence on international politics especially the South China Sea is posing, what Thucydides' has coined as 'Security Dilemma' for the existing superpower – the US. How this potential threat can be patterned? Many realists and liberal theories of international relations have put forward their arguments, i.e. the advocacy of liberalist emphasis on the policy of institutional and economic engagement of China to integrate her into the global economy. This means that some liberal scholars have a belief that if the Chinese are allowed to make progress in the economic sector it will then minimize the possibility of potential conflict. Because Economic progress will persuade the Chinese government that it is more suitable for them to cooperate with western countries. On the contrary, realists presented an aggressive approach to the Chinese economic surge i.e. involving China in containment policies. Realists argue that American hegemony and the status quo can be destabilizing if the system of proper checks and balances for minimizing Chinese growth has been not introduced (Kirshner, 2010) (Whyte, 2013).

Keeping in view the developments in the South China Sea, one can easily say that realists are far more dominant in such a scenario. Organski has presented the concept of Power Transition which argues that “power struggle” (realism) or ‘power cycle’ – attaining, increasing, and maintaining power – dissatisfied the international system. The international system where a single superpower and many great powers exist is most likely to disturb due to the rise or increase in power of great powers since the hegemon consider such developments as a threat. Organski stated that “war is likely to be precipitated by a faster-growing upstart in its attempt to displace the declining hegemon” (Tammen D. L., 2003). The basic assumption of Power Transition Theory says that war looms when the existing hegemon is challenged by secondary great power. By keeping in view the parameters of great powers, the contest in the South China Sea between China and America is perfectly reflecting Organski's Power Transition Theory.

Power Transition Theory

The chief architect of power transition theory is Organski who in late 1950 coined the assumption of the relationship between states and how it operates in the international political arena. Organski's power transition theory argues that in an anarchic international political set up the distribution of power solely relies on hegemonic behavior, i.e. rules in international relations are set by a more powerful state (Benson, 2007). Power transition theory gives more focus on the hierarchical structure of the international political setup than on anarchy which contributes to the dissatisfaction of emerging states or satisfaction of the hegemon (Danilovic, 2008). According to Organski's power transition theory where the top hegemon sets the rules for resources and influence utilizations which suit best their interests. Others states below the hegemon either satisfied or dissatisfied with such distribution of power. Those states which get satisfied with the current rule of games set by the hegemon usually streamline their interests with major power and, support and help the policies to ensure peace and stability (Harris, 2014). On the other hand, those states which dissatisfied with the rules set by the hegemon start finding ways to curtail the game rules. Such a struggle between the hegemon and the emerging power forge conflict in international political theatre (Lebow, 2009).

Features of Organski's Power Transition Theory

There are many features of Organski's power transition theory ranging from domestic power transition to the international political arena of power and influence. However, the writer focuses on the features which best suits the Sino-US struggle in the South China Sea. Some of these features of power transition theory better explain the relationship between China and The United States i.e (the concept of hierarchal international order and dissatisfied power in the international system). Moreover, these features are contested in comparison with classical realism particularly the balance of power realism to fully understand the 'strategic rebalancing' phenomenon of the study.

The preponderance as Peace Keeping Agent

The striking difference between classical realism and power transition theory is anarchy and hierarchy respectively (Silvius, 2014). Though both paradigms emphasize the state as a central actor in the international system and its power capability matters in building relations (Khoo, 2013). Due to such similarities, power transition theory is considered as a branch of realism (DiCicco, 2003). However, there is a difference of opinion in the subject matter of war and peace in international relations (Christensen, 2001). For instance, in the balance of power realism for ensuring peace and stability among conflicting parties, the necessity of a balance of power phenomena is a top priority (Changhe, 2008). War is most likely to happened when one power start enhancing its power influence which disturbs the constructed balance of power phenomena in international relations (Finel, 2002). On the contrary power transition theory presents the complete opposite of the balance of power assumption of war and peace in the international system, i.e. balance of power phenomenon is not a guarantee of preserving peace rather it is an invitation to war (Paul, 2004). According to the power transition theory, higher stability in the international system is acquired with a large imbalance where a powerful hegemon enforces the terms of peace and stability (Lobell, 2016).

"A preponderance of power on the one side [...] increases the chances of peace, for the greatly stronger side need not fight at all to get what it wants, while the weaker side would be plainly foolish to attempt to battle for what it wants" (Organski, 1968).

Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction in Status Quo

The second basic difference between classical realism or balance of power phenomenon and power transition realism is the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of hegemon and rising power in already existing international order constructed or enforced by major powers (Kugler, 1996). In the classical balance of power realism revisionism of state is always considered as a threat to the existing hegemon and distribution of power pattern in international order (Waltz, 2008). In order to sustain peace and stability, a key focus is given on the status quo while any revisionist activities are termed as security dilemmas for the existing hegemon and international order is most likely to change in such a scenario (Ringsmose, 2008). To sum up, the classical balance of power realists target the emerging power for disturbing the international order as it forges an atmosphere of distrust between the hegemon and rising power (Walt, 1987).

On contrary, power transition theory depends on the variable of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with-in the status quo (Rauch, 2016). Since it is a common phenomenon that emerging power is always dissatisfied with the existing international order (Lemke, 2006). So according to power transition theory, it is not emerging power which is posing threat to international order rather it is the hegemon that has created such an order where emerging powers are at a disadvantage while creator and allies benefit themselves (Tammen R. L., 2006). This dilemma pushes rising power to challenge the 'international order' to reduce the level of dissatisfaction in the existing status quo (Schweller, 1994). It is also the fact that the existing dominant power does not give up voluntarily 'its own' international order (Lee, 2015). The establishment of a new order is the need for rising power while the existing hegemon wants to maintain the status quo, this is why the need for use of force or war or conflict of interest happened (NOLTE, 2010). In short, according to the power transition theory, the motivation of challenging the international order by the revisionist state is constituted by the factor of dissatisfaction in the prevailing status quo.

The Relevance of Theory with the Study

Both the aforementioned variables of power transition theory i.e. preponderance as peacekeeping agent and satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the status quo suits best the prevailing turmoil between China and the US in the South China Sea. In this study, China is considered as an emerging power that is competing against the unipolar world hegemon – the US. As mentioned earlier, an emerging state when dissatisfied with the established norms of international order constructed by the prevailing hegemon, usually challenge the game rules. Moreover, the differences i.e. from ideological outfit to economic understanding, between China and the US are also convincing enough to contest Organski's power transition theory. Similarly, the variable of preponderance is also contributing 'its' part in Sino-US turbulence in the South China Sea. In this regard, China as an emerging power has overcome the factor of preponderance in international order i.e. according to Organski's power transition theory preponderance in international politics helps the powerful hegemon to not be challenged. However, Chinese geostrategic and economic bonhomie reduce the level of preponderance where the US and 'its' constructed international order can be questioned.

In the 21st century, state power and its political influence in the international system are measured by economic growth. In this regard, Chinese military modernization, economic growth, and maritime policies in the Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea, are challenging the American hegemony. Chinese dissatisfaction with game rules in international order established by the hegemon, US is the main reason which surely is/will disturb the Organski's preponderance phenomenon. On the other hand, the US for rebalancing or re-sitting international preponderance is implying the policy of geographical encirclement of China. Such policy requires strengthening its economic and military ties with surrounding states and a stronghold in the South China Sea which justifies the US current policy in the East Asian Region.

Similarly, China, on contrary, to escape 'its' dissatisfaction in the international system, has created a strong economic influence in South and Central Asia, Africa, and, in other pivotal points where Chinese leverage in the South China Sea can be created to challenge US hegemonic position. Chinese strengthening territorial sovereignty claims in the South China Sea is an illustration of such intentions. Chinese extraterritorial jurisdiction has disturbed the preponderance phenomenon in the South China Sea which is the key factor for forging tension over maritime borders, sea-lanes and, free trade, and transportation dilemmas.

Conclusion

South China Sea has been the center of magnificent concern for the great powers of the world like the PRC and the US. The struggle in this region is intensely rooted in the contemporary history of the South China Sea. Beijing had many battles with the Philippines and Vietnam in the past (Mazza, 2019). It was much easy for Washington to counterbalance in the region and to stop China from confronting smaller countries in the South China Sea because Beijing was not such an authoritative country in the past as it is today. PRC of 2015 has been a greater challenge for the pre-eminence of Washington in different zones of the world (Parameswaran, 2019) The observation of the US reconnaissance containers cannot stop the Islet from making the process of PRC in the South China Sea. US is operating her traditional strategies to pledge China in the area like all such campaigns which the US used throughout the Cold War with USSR (Huang, 2018). The US is exasperating to strengthen the martial power of her associates located in the South China Sea to rejoinder any possible ferocity from Beijing on them.

A New Cold War has become visible in the South China Sea in all forms and manifestations. Earlier to this issue, the symbols of the New Cold War were puzzling for a common spectator but the skirmish of the South China Sea and Islet building process of China in the region underlined the recurrence of the Cold War in its full swing. As the public of China talks about a striking, issue in a highly unassertive Way. Similarly, they identified much more about the starring role of the USA in the South China Sea. They professed openly about the “Double Standards” of Washington. It validates that they are making to respond to the dual morality of the US in the area and beyond. China has lost its conviction in the US and it could momentarily shake the relationships of both these states in the world. It will also distract the business ties of both China and the US, while they are prime trade cronies (Cronin, 2018).

The hidden goal of the foreign policy of the US is to contain any emerging challenger in the world. China is a new rising challenger in many areas predominantly in the South China Sea. In the name of nonviolent advancement, China, want to become a world power. The benefits of both the state's crash with each other unintentionally (Mehta, 2015). Although both China and the US do not want to antagonize each other the welfares of both these states will remain in rattle with each other in the coming future. The presence of US militaries in the Pacific region is to be anticipated to rise in reaction to China's expansion. The US will be no longer outstanding power in the area of Asia Pacific.

If two states with dissimilar ideologies are good trade partners, then it does not necessarily demonstrate that there will be no stress between them. It does not mean that they will secure the interests of each other. They are contestants and strains will rise further, when China becomes a more powerful nation. Before the 1990s there were few points of deviations between the PRC and the US but after the 1990s these themes became diverse, the relations between PRC and the US became complex because China had become a contestant of the US (Eckstein, 2016) Obama's government focused on the countries located in the South East and the South China Sea to pawn the hegemonic schemes of the PRC. Japan and South Korea are magnificent allies of the US to work for its benefits in the region, while Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei are considering the backing of the US to counterpoise China in the region. Smaller states like Vietnam and the Philippines cannot stand against China without the backing of the US. Both these countries have claims on different islets with the validation of their juxtaposition to the Islands (Burns, 2018). All the Islands like Spratly, Parcels, and Scarborough Shoal are very far from China, but her hegemonic schemes, military strength, and strong economy force her to delineate a U-shaped line in the South China Sea to encircle the area of her sovereignty. The Islet making of China is a foreign territory building process. The US differentiates it the peril for the peace of the world but China exhibits it an exertion for peaceful development (Gertz, 2017). This is in fact an exceedingly advanced hegemonic design. If China becomes successful in this design, then it will endure the procedure of generating more and more Islets. There would be new competitiveness in fabricating synthetic islands in the world. This action does not portray an economic activity, but it displays the strategic determination of a nation (Mughal, Second Cold War, 2017) Thus, it is crystal clear that the battle of the South China Sea is not only a conflict of China with few states likes Vietnam and Brunei but also it is an indirect conflict between Washington and Beijing. But this is the new Cold War, which was in progress between the US and China, has been discernible in the issue of the South China Sea in all its forms and manifestations.

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