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# CHINA ON STAGE. GEOS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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**Abstract:** On stage we have China, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei in the first dimension, then the U.S., Japan, Russia, Australia and South Korea in the second dimension and finally The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Some experts argue that the natural resources are the cause of the regional dispute. However, it is the opinion of this author that this view is an oversimplification and is dangerously misleading.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, Power, Geopolitics, Geostrategy, Geoeconomics, Security Dilemma.

**Resumo:** O mar sul da China é uma região rica em recursos Naturais e adiciona ser uma das mais movimentadas vias marítimas do globo o que representa razões suficientes para os Estados Unidos e os Países adjacentes permanecerem preocupados com a reclamação e o ressurgimento por parte da China de quase todo o mar do Sul da China, provocando tensões e percepções geopolíticas entre os envolvidos. Contudo, é da opinião do autor que os Estados Unidos marcam presença na região não pelas razões indicadas, mas sim para conter a China de alcançar uma hegemonia mundial. O autor defende o seu argumento com teorias comprovadas e com testemunhos de diversos peritos no campo das Relações Internacionais. Acrescente-se que o palco em questão foi apelidado pelo famoso estrategista em Guerra Marítima, Nicholas Spykman que apelidou a região de “O Mediterrâneo Asiático”.

**Palavras-chave:** Mar do Sul da China, Poder, Geopolítica, Geoestratégia, Geoeconomia, Dilema de segurança.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to better understand the significance of America's "pivot to Asia", and to offer sustained research regarding the reasons and dynamics behind this change. The growing geopolitical significance of Asia, as well as the growing role of China as a force for stability in the region as well as on the international level, represents a remarkable and historic shift. Despite the America's unquestionable continuing dominance in World affairs, the "unipolar moment" has turned out to be brief; and has already ended. The power epicenter has shifted Eastwards; with international recognition that the World's geopolitical center is not on the move, it has already moved from Atlantic to Pacific.

This geopolitical shift has brought with it increased economic interdependence which in turn has also created a demand for resources. Growing economies have a strong tendency to increase their defense spending, as economic growth brings with it the capacity to acquire new military equipment; thus, leading to a tendency towards militarization and military modernization. This militarizing tendency, accompanied also by the natural desire of newly industrializing countries to have the means necessary to secure their own national interests and security, results in a complexity of dynamics. The emergence of the present security dilemma, could admittedly result in armed conflict<sup>1</sup>; not least of all because the major powers in the International System have already been drawn into this nexus.

## Pacific on stage

Competition for natural resources, as well as the importance of the major shipping lanes through its waters, are often cited as the primary reasons for the South China Sea dispute. However, limiting the causative factors of the dispute to these reasons alone is a dangerously misleading oversimplification. Another oft-cited reason for the dispute is the growing militarization of China; which as is often claimed, has resulted in an in an escalating trend of militarization on the part of the other claimants to the South China Sea dispute. Thus, it is argued that

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<sup>1</sup>See, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the independent resource on global security, Military expenditure database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

China, through its drives for military modernization, has exacerbated tensions and resultantly militarized the region. Except that this line of reasoning ignores any culpability on the part of the other actors in this affair; as well as the fact that China was not the first stakeholder to the dispute to resort to such measures.

Recently the world has witnessed the creation of Xi Jinping's personal political ideology; which will entrench his position in the legacy of the Communist Party on a footing equal to that of Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. Xi's "theory" emphasizes China's nascent ascension to the status of a great power, as can be evidenced through such statements by Xi himself as "It is time for us to take center stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind" (Martel, 2017). This shows a leader with confidence asserting that his country has already become a great power; while also reinforcing China's political culture. For Xi Jinping, China's socialist democracy is the world's most genuine and most effective democracy to safeguard his people; China doesn't need to copy any other political system. Regarding the South China Sea, Xi Jinping noted that the artificial islands were a significant development of the last five years; heightening tensions with other stakeholders, including the United States. The President also noted that China is not seeking conflict, but nonetheless highlighted the reorganization of China's military as a significant achievement over the last five years and further promised continued changes including increasing the professionalism of officers and improvements in weaponry; promising that China's military capabilities would be first class in all fields.

A few hours later, the United States Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said America would deepen co-operation with India in the face of a growing Chinese peril in Asia. According to Tillerson's speech as given at the center for Strategic and International Studies, China is a non-democratic society and America should recognize India as a potential partner in a strategic relationship that could never happen with China. In Tillerson's words, China has sometimes acted outside of accepted international norms; and gave the South China Sea Dispute as an example. In Tillerson's words: "We will not shrink from China's challenges to the rules-based order and where China subverts the sovereignty of neighboring countries and disadvantages the US and friends" (Tillerson, 2017).

Taken together, it would seem that Asia has become a priority in American foreign policy, politics and ideology. Asia is transcending the present dimensions of geopolitical power, and restructuring the dynamic of geopolitics towards one that focuses on economic efficiency rather than military might. America's concern with the South China Sea is not due merely to any fear of a potential military escalation in the region, or even commitment to treaty allies; rather America's involvement in the dispute is an attempt to contain an ascendant China<sup>2</sup>. In

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<sup>2</sup> See, Nye, Joseph S. "Should China Be 'Contained'?" CNN, July 4, 2011. And Nye, Joseph S. Jr. "Work With China, Don't Contain It." *The New York Times*, January 25, 2013.

other words, China's nascent ascension to the status of a regional and global power represents the antithesis of the established global order which threatens America's own hegemony. Containing China is a platform held up by two pillars, one geopolitical and one geostrategic. Geopolitically, containing China reduces her to the status of a regional power. Geo-strategically, containing China ensures the continuing dominance of the American hegemony<sup>3</sup>. This view is supported by Mearsheimer, who observes, "The United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated in the twentieth century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States can be expected to go to great length to contain China," (Mearsheimer, 2014).

### Geostrategies versus Goeconomics

Goeconomics<sup>4</sup> is defined by Allison thus: "Goeconomics, which is the use of economic instruments (from trade and investment policy to sanctions, cyberattacks, and foreign aid) to achieve geopolitical goals" (Allison, 2017). Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris in their book "War by Other Means: Goeconomics and Statecraft" offer another definition: "it's not using economic tools for economic purposes, although those are fine, notable objectives. It's using these economic tools to advance a government, a nation's geopolitical interests." (Blackwill, 2016). There is nothing novel in this strategy, countries of the past and present have employed and continue to employ goeconomic strategies as a means to achieving their goals. Russia frequently uses her energy resources as leverage over other nations; and economic sanction is a tool frequently employed by the USA in pursuing her geopolitical interests. Both these nations and others use state-owned or iconic companies to achieve geopolitical ends. The shift in focus towards Goeconomics in political dialogue today has occurred due to China's ongoing and successful use of this stratagem.

China is presently investing billions in both soft and hard power tools, all towards her age-old goal of balancing and effectively utilizing her economy. China invests billions every year in Confucius institutes around the world and in scholarship programs for foreign students to study China. More significantly, China invests in establishing global financial and economic institutions such the New Development Bank, a bank related to BRICS<sup>5</sup>; the Regional Comprehensive

<sup>3</sup> See also, Agnew, John. "American Hegemony and the New Geography of Power." In *Hegemony: The New Shape Of Global Power*, 37-70. PHILADELPHIA: Temple University Press, 2005. See also, Zhu, Zhiquan. 2006. *US-China relations in the 21st century: power transition and peace*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>4</sup> The formation of Goeconomics as a dynamic of geopolitics is often attributed to Edward Luttwak, an American economist and consultant, and Pascal Lorot, a French economist and political scientist.

<sup>5</sup> The acronym "BRICS" was initially created in 2001 by Jim O'Neill a Goldman Sachs's Economist, in

Economic Partnership; and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Lim and Ikenberry note: "As China's rise is occurring within this established system of institutions, we begin our inquiry by asking how China is engaging, confronting, and making choices about these institutions and this order" (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017). China's strategy is a rational and intelligent one; as soft power mechanisms have frequently been shown to be more effective, enduring and cost-beneficial than hard power ones. China is demonstrating an astounding ability to combine hard and soft power into an effective *modus operandi*. As Nye noted, "Contextual intelligence is needed to produce an integrated strategy that combines hard and soft power" (Nye 2009).

The growing and continued exploitation of the contested waters<sup>7</sup> of the South China Sea dispute by China and its neighbors heighten the risk that miscalculations by leaders could trigger an armed conflict, which the United States could be drawn into through its military commitments to her ally the Philippines. Jeffrey Bader, Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael McDevitt have noted that the "United States has a critical interest in providing reassurance to its allies and partners in the region that it will maintain a strong security presence to prevent a power vacuum from developing as China rises" (Jeffrey et al, 2014). In terms of conflict management<sup>8</sup>, bilateral negotiation continues to be the most

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a report on growth prospects for the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China. In 2006, the four countries initiated a regular informal diplomatic coordination, with annual meetings of Foreign Ministers. This successful interaction led to the First Summit, held in Russia, Yekaterinburg in 2009, and the depth and scope of the dialogue among the Members of BRICs - which became BRICS in 2011 with the inclusion of South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power and Smart Power." In *The Instruments & Institutions of American Purpose*, edited by Campbell Kurt M. and Price Jonathon, by Nye Joseph S. and Scowcroft Brent, 29-33. See; Aspen Institute, 2009. Wilson, Ernest J. "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See, Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage," *The National Interest*, 23 May 2016, accessed at <http://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/south-china-sea-how-we-got-stage-16118>, 12 December 2016. On the competition between China and Southeast Asian claimant states over oil, gas, and fisheries resources, see also Leszek Buszynski, "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry," *Washington Quarterly* 35 (Spring 2012): 139-156. Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage," *The National Interest*, 23 May 2016, accessed at <http://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/south-china-sea-how-we-got-stage-16118>, 12 December 2016. On the competition between China and Southeast Asian claimant states over oil, gas, and fisheries resources, see also Leszek Buszynski, "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry," *Washington Quarterly* 35 (Spring 2012): 139-156.

<sup>8</sup> About China Management and policy see Fu Ying, "Disorder or the Reconstruction of Order?" *Straits Times*, 28 July 2016, accessed at <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/disorder-or-the-reconstruction-of-order>, 17 March 2017; and Xu Bu, "Mei 'zai- pingheng zhanlue shi daozhi nanhai jinzhang zhongyao yuanyin" [U.S. rebalance strategy is an important cause of South China Sea tensions], *Lianhe zaobao*, 7 May 2016, accessed at <http://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/views/opinion/story20160507-614157>, 17 March 2017. See also Feng Zhang, "Challenge Accepted: China's Response to the U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific," *Security Challenges* 12 (November 2016): 45-60. FRAVEL, M. TAYLOR. "China's Strategy in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 292-319.

successful pathway to conflict prevention. China has long rejected dealing with issues of Chinese national interest through multilateral institutions; but in the last twenty years China has accepted multilateralism as a means to handling security issues in the region, even involving outside powers such as the US. For China, the practice of multilateralism as a means of maintaining East Asian security has become tolerable, and at times China has even enthusiastically pushed for it; however, China has resoundingly reserves territorial issues for bilateral negotiations with other claimant states. China has prosecuted her geopolitical goals through four diplomatic fiats conducted through participation in regional organizations as well as international institutions.

Firstly, China has sought improved relations with ASEAN<sup>9</sup>. China's 2002 accession to the ASEAN code of conduct on disputes in the South China Sea; acceptance of ASEAN plus three, as opposed to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation<sup>10</sup> (APEC) framework, thus including the United States; working to establish a Security Policy Conference within the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)<sup>11</sup>; and movement towards an ASEAN-China Free Trade area. These friendly overtures on the part of China evince a fundamental shift in attitude on the part of China regarding relations between herself and ASEAN; demonstrating an earnestness towards improved ties. This is a significant departure from previous encounters between China and ASEAN; sometimes marred by mutual animosity and hostility.

Secondly, China has pursued deeping strategic partnerships through bilateral relations; thus, creating interdependence. Interdependence is thus defined by Keohane and Nye: "Interdependence, most simply defined, means mutual dependence. Interdependence<sup>12</sup> in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different

<sup>9</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

<sup>10</sup> The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a regional economic forum established in 1989 to leverage the growing interdependence of the Asia-Pacific. APEC's 21 members aim to create greater prosperity for the people of the region by promoting balanced, inclusive, sustainable, innovative and secure growth and by accelerating regional economic integration.  
<https://www.apec.org/About-Us/About-APEC>

<sup>11</sup> The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is an important forum for security dialogue in Asia. It draws together 27 members which have a bearing on the security of the Asia Pacific region. See <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org>

<sup>12</sup> See Khong, Yuen Foong. "Primacy or World Order? The United States and China's Rise—A Review Essay." *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, vol. 38. no. 3. (Winter 2013/14): pp. 153-175. See also; Copeland, Dale C. "Theory of Economic Interdependence and War." In *Economic Interdependence and War*, 16-50. Princeton University Press, 2015. Goldstein, Avery. "Great expectations: interpreting China's arrival." *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1997, p. 36+. Academic OneFile, Accessed 27 Oct. 2017. Cooper, Richard N. "Economic Interdependence and Foreign Policy in the Seventies." *World Politics* 24, no. 2 (1972): 159-81. doi:10.2307/2009735.



countries.” (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Stakeholders such as the ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia, South Korea and America are increasingly tied to China through trade and investment; thus, generating greater political influence for China. China’s rapid economic growth and the growing economic ties she has with other Asian states is the principle reasons for China’s growing authority in the Asia-pacific region. As Shambaugh notes: “This gives China the incentive to seek greater influence and control over its external environment. For example, China will no doubt be increasingly reluctant to depend on other states for the protection of the South Asian and Southeast Asian sea lanes” (Shambaugh, 2004).

Thirdly, China is actively participating in bilateral and multilateral forums regarding regional security issues as a means to reducing distrust and anxiety in the field of security. Schambaugh, an international recognized authority in contemporary Chinese affairs, observes that “In an attempt to improve perceptions, Beijing has mounted a major public relations offensive in recent years, investing billions of dollars around the world in a variety of efforts” (Shambaugh, 2015). Not only is China committed to participation in international institutions regarding security, but is further demonstrating commitment towards participation in regional forums to reduce the security dilemmas regarding herself and her neighbors. In a recent speech, President Xi Jinping emphasized the term “Military Defense.” In President Xi’s own words: “Our army is the people’s army; our defense is national defense. [We must] enhance national defense education, consolidate the unity between the military and the civilian populace, so as to achieve the Chinese dream of a strong military.” (Gao,2017).

Furthermore, China expanded a dynamic network of bilateral military talks involving officers, scholars and analysts among the claimant states. As Aaron L. Friedberg noted, China has sought “An expanding network of bilateral military-to-military talks; and an even wider array of quasi-official track-2 security dialogues involving scholars, analyst, and bureaucrats from countries in the region” (Friedberg, 2005).

Fourthly, China is investing billions in soft power, China has committed to supporting international cooperation, global economic integration and support for the developing world. China has initiated the “One Belt, One Road”<sup>13</sup> initiative to build roads, railways and other infrastructure projects that will solidify Chinese economic and political influence.

How Chinese geopolitical confidence and growing leadership will impact American interests in Southeast Asia depends on how US interests are defined. The United States’ own interests in the region are diverse. To begin with, the US Navy has long dominated this maritime region, which is a vital pass for US warships traveling between the Pacific and the Middle East. Freedom of navigation

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<sup>13</sup> See Tai Wei Lim, Henry Hing Lee Chan, Katherine Hui-Yi Tseng and Wen Xim Lim. 2016. China’s One Belt One Road, Imperial College press.

in the East and South China Seas is a declared national security priority for the US. The growing involvement of US energy companies in the extraction of oil and natural gas from the South China Sea has added another layer to the United States' interests. While a number of material interests of strategic importance to the US in the South China Sea can be found, in actuality the paramount goal of the US is to curb the ascension of China as a major world power so as to avoid the future prospect of a humiliating transition of world hegemony. As Mearsheimer observed, "the United States will, therefore, form a balancing coalition in Asia, which will include most of China's neighbors and the United States. And they will work overtime to try to contain China and prevent it from dominating Asia" (Navarro, 2016)

America's containment strategy may go through her allies by reinforcing or building new bilateral relations with such states as India or Japan. Such actions carry a great deal of potential peril, since such posturing on the part of the US will be viewed by China as a provocative challenge to its own interests and national security. When states feel threatened or challenged by a hegemonic power, they tend to view such as a security dilemma. A State's strategy in handling such a dilemma can take to possible forms: military build-up, such as through the modernization of military forces or the acquisition of new military hardware; or secondly through the reinforcement of standing military alliances or the building of new ones with other States.

### Geopolitics in south China Sea

The Dutch-American geostrategic and geopolitical<sup>14</sup> expert Nicholas Spykman once opined "Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent" (Spykman, 1942). Two years after making the above quote, Spykman challenged the eminent geopolitical expert Mackinder's famous observation "Whoever rules East Europe commands the Heartland; whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; whoever rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder, 1996) by retorting: "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls

<sup>14</sup> See Cohen, Saul Bernard. 2003. *Geopolitics of the world system*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. See also; Charles L. Glaser. "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain?: The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation." *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 49-90; Evelyn Goh. "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies." *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 113-157; Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and the Effects upon International Politics*, (Washington and London: Kennikat Press, 1920, p 25-27, 167-8, 172); Zbigniew Brzezinski, (1997). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Perseus Books, New York, pp. XIII-XIV, 30-31, and Kissinger, Henry, (1994). *Diplomacy*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

the destinies of the world” (Spykman, 1944). Spykman once referred to the South China Sea as the “Asiatic Mediterranean,” and noted the similarities between the Strait of Malacca and the Panama Canal, predicting China would one day be a dominant power.

The South China Sea region is the second busiest international sea-lane in the world, with more than half of the world’s supertanker traffic transiting its waters. The South China Sea also has a rich reserve of oil and gas resources strategically located near large energy-consuming countries. It’s a natural inference to conclude from the above statistics that America’s concern with the South China Sea stems merely from the economic impact that such a significant region naturally has upon America’s own domestic economy and national security, and that this is the main reason for the US’s active involvement in the South China Sea dispute. However, it is the opinion of this author that the primary aim of US foreign policy as regards the South China Sea dispute is to contain China and prevent her from challenging US global hegemony.

Robert D. Kaplan, an authority on foreign affairs, considered the complexity of the geopolitics surrounding the South China Sea, noting in an interview with Rudyard Griffiths, that “The South China Sea is to China what the Greater Caribbean was to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The United States became a great power, geopolitically, by dominating the Caribbean” (Griffiths, 2015). The American view is that if China were to dominate the South China Sea, then China would control the fate of the world.

## Security dilemma and interdependence

The term “security dilemma”<sup>15</sup> has been used to mean a variety of different things on the part of security theorists in describing events and contingencies in the field of national security ever since the term was first coined by John Herz; and the term has numerous definitions as well. For Herz, “security dilemma” simply meant that a scenario could arise that would prompt a State to be concerned about the question of its own existence or the possibility of being dominated by other states. Because a state must be concerned about their security to not be dominated by others, Herz noted “a State can never feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on” (Herz, 1951).

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<sup>15</sup> See, Herz, John H. (1950). *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma*. See also, Jervis, R. “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* vol. 30, no.2 (January 1978), pp. 167–174; and Jervis, R. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power”.

The concept was further discussed years later by Robert Jervis, who considered the predicament of a state acting on a “security dilemma” as merely a stage in which a state employs those means “by which a state tries to increase its security from others” (Jervis, 1978). Indeed, this presents a self-reinforcing dynamic which Jervis called the “spiral model,” which simply put means an arms race. Increased national wealth and the proportionate share of gross national product are driving nations to enhance their military expenditures and pursue military modernization. It is in the case of China that we see this correlation between increasing national wealth and increasing militarization most clearly.

The “spiral mode” of military and strategic modernization following economic development in a defense-oriented China has resulted in an increased trend of militarization on the part of the other littoral countries of the South China Sea region. However, since states cannot always be fully aware of the intentions of other states, states might interpret a defensive buildup as offensive, thus leading to an arms race. As Mearsheimer states “No state can be certain about other states’ intentions” (Mearsheimer 2001).

The reasons behind the arms build-up in the South China Sea region, therefore, are: firstly, because the other claimant states in the South China Sea dispute are unaware of China’s true intentions; and secondly because an increase in one state’s defensive capabilities represents a decrease in those of another, prompting competitive build-up, as Glaser observed, “Because of the security dilemma, when the state arms, it makes its adversary less secure by reducing the adversary’s ability to defend itself. The adversary then buys additional arms in order to restore its military capability” (Glaser, 1997). In other words, China’s military build-up does not follow from combative posturing regarding the South China Sea, or any other dispute, but rather simply follows as a matter of course as a country hitherto unable to provide for its own defense modernizes and acquires such means; and the build-up of the other states is simply reciprocal to maintaining their own capabilities as the curve rises.

In addition, the United States is increasing its military presence in the region, reinforcing relations with its allies, such as the Philippines, Japan and India; in a clear move to rebalance its strategic priorities in the region which has led to a perception that conflict could occur. Such misperceptions could lead both countries into conflict or, as Allison describes it “Thucydides’s Trap”.

Allison observed in his recent book “Destined for War”, that the world has never witnessed anything comparable to China’s meteoric economic rise; and that this development has transformed China into a great power. Allison also notes that, while a conflict between United States and China would be imprudent and improbable on its own, one cannot discount man’s folly. Allison concludes in his impressive book that if the rise of China has caused a genuine shift in the balance of world power, then regarding the South China Sea issue, the United States, rather

taking a military approach, should first reflect upon the ramifications of any such approach. Allison warns that if the United States continues as it has been, then both countries may fall into Thucydides's trap and end up in a pyrrhic war. The problem is psychological projection, as Allison concludes: "Xi and Trump both begin with maximalist claims. But both are also dealmakers. The more the US government understands China's aims, the better prepared it will be to resolve differences." (Allison,2017)

## Conclusion

It is the opinion of this author that the United States, and not China, may be the catalyst for any potential conflict. We in the West may actually concern ourselves too much with the internal nature of the Chinese regime, and seek to limit China's power abroad because simply we do not care for their domestic policies. The US has and continues to act unilaterally, making vociferous and generalized declarations concerning "democracy," "human rights" or other established Western values or principles while leaving the specifics of their intentions vague or unstated. America's purpose is to suppress the rise of China and deter a transition of power in the future. In other words, the strong belief in "American exceptionalism"<sup>16</sup> has deterred the country from accepting the new power as the new "*exceptionalism*". Digressing from whether China's interests are valid or not; China's pursuit of its own geopolitical interests are certainly no more provocative than those of any other major power, including the United States. China merely seeks to establish its own "Monroe doctrine"<sup>17</sup> as regards securing its own interests in the geopolitical corner of the world it occupies. As Kupchan observed, "Just as the United States unfurled the Monroe Doctrine to ward off European powers that challenged U.S. hegemony in the western Hemisphere, China is set to lay claim to a sphere of influence in Northeast Asian and guardianship of the region's vital sea lanes." (Kupchan, 2012)

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<sup>16</sup> American exceptionalism is an ideology that holds that the United States is unique among nations with respect to its ideals of democracy and personal freedom. See, Roberts, Timothy, and Lindsay DiCuirici. (Eds). *American Exceptionalism. Volumes 1-4*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012, 1552 pp. A compilation of the primary sources on the subject of American exceptionalism, including pamphlets, sermons, newspaper and magazine articles from colonial period to 1900; Hodgson, Godfrey (2009). *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Yale University Press; Kagan, Robert (2003). *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*. Knopf. ISBN 1-4000-4093-0; de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America* (1840), part 2, p. 36: "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one."; Nolan, James L. "AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM." In *Legal Accents, Legal Borrowing: The International Problem-Solving Court Movement*, 136-56. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The Monroe Doctrine was a policy of opposing by United States in 1823. See Hobsbawm, E. J. 1987. *The age of empire, 1875-1914*. New York: Pantheon Books; see also; Sexton, Jay. 2011. *The Monroe Doctrine: empire and nation in nineteenth-century America*. New York: Hill and Wang.

America's aim in Asia should be neither balance nor dominance. It is precisely because hard power still plays so central a role in international relations that the US must tread softly and make room for an ascendant China. The United States shouldn't seek to increase its military power in the western Pacific, but neither can the US afford to substantially decrease it. The United States should seek instead to reassess its present predicament and not seek to insert its self into the South China Sea issue, or other major geopolitical issues, ostensibly to act as a self-declared "balancer" to other state's real or imagined ascensions. Does the rise of one country imperil the world order, simply because it is more powerful than it was hitherto? Even if such were the case, who has the right to declare whether or if another country has the right or obligation to stand as a check or balance to that country? Does the US seeking to impose its self as a check to China, or any other country, not its self implies a unilateralism even more menacing to the rule of law than China's pursuit of national interests in its own neighborhood, even assuming China's interests to be menacing themselves? China has not yet made the implications of its rise felt on the international scene, and it is as yet unknown what China's true intentions are regarding the established international order, who is to say whether or not China is a revisionist country and a truly dangerous aggressor. One does not observe China declaring it self a "balancer" to the actions of Russia, the US, or any other great power. Actually, in the opinion of this author this may even be a case of "overbalancing,"<sup>18</sup> the US reading too much into the actions of China and overestimating the value of these actions upon the world order, thereby seeking to impose its self, thus triggering an arms spiral with China.

Schweller, in his brilliant work, "Unanswered Threats", defined: "Overbalancing (or inappropriate balancing), which unnecessarily triggers a costly and dangerous arms spiral because the target is misperceived as an aggressor but is, instead, a defensively minded state seeking only enhance its security" (Schweller, 2006). History has numerous examples of such can lead to disputes that could potentially transform into conflicts.

A few years ago, NATO expanded its influence into Eastern Europe to the open protestation of Russia; and even after Russia's opposition, Europe and the United States continued expansion and influence in other ways, such as through the diffusion of Western institutions and social media into Ukraine. This expansionism results from an incorrect perception and strategy, as Mearsheimer

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<sup>18</sup> See Schweller, Randall L. "A Theory of Underbalancing: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation." In *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, 46-68. Princeton University Press, 2006. See also, Yongyi, Fei. "The Chinese View on Strategic Balance and Containment in Asia." *Peace Research* 38, no. 1 (2006): 55-58; Gray, Colin S. "Containment." In *The Geopolitics Of Super Power*, 113-31. University Press of Kentucky, 1988; Shapiro, Ian. "Democracy for Containment." In *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror*, 102-18. PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press, 2007.

notes: “Russian leaders have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement and in recent years...have made it clear that they would not stand by while their strategically important neighbor turned into a Western bastion... For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine’s democratically elected and pro-Russian president – which he rightly labeled a ‘coup’ – was the final straw. He responded by taking Crimea, a peninsula he feared would host a NATO naval base, and worked to destabilize Ukraine until it abandoned its efforts to join the West. Putin’s pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia’s backyard and threatening its core strategic interests.” (Mearsheimer, 2017).

The crises in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are the result of Western overexpansion at the expense of the interests of other geopolitical actors. This is indicative of a larger trend on the part of the West regarding how it views its self in geopolitics today; a sort of “solipsism” in which the narrative-building of the West, and its interests and values, are seen as primary to those of elsewhere, entitling it to unilateralism.

China’s achievement has not only transformed China and the region, but the balance of power in the world, as Allison notes “The size of China’s displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance” (Allison, 2017). Such a balance may be dependent on economic cooperation as well; the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) could serve as a platform in the economic dimension and could serve to help, bringing a new dynamic to the relationship; establishing peace and preventing an escalation of armed conflict between claimants.

Furthermore, the growing economic interdependence between the claimants and China, as well as between the United States and China, could be useful in mitigating the dispute. However, this Interdependence should be balanced, because it could have either positive or negative results: conflict could be ameliorated through trade; or such interdependence may be viewed as exploitative leveraging and motivate conflict.

I suggest the United States should not engage China through unilateral attempts to contain China’s growth or curb her influence. Such actions, whatever their motivation or intent, will only incentive China to buck the established institutions of the present world order in favor of new ones. If China perceives that it cannot rely on the impartiality of present institutions, then this will strengthen the narrative that such institutions hold an inherently Western bias, thus pushing China to seek new ones. Rather, the US should seek alternative means to engaging the dispute by incentivizing China to resort to peaceable, bilateral negotiations with its neighbors.

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#### RESEARCH CENTRES, INSTITUTES, AND THINK-TANKS

- ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration
- UNCLOS, United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea
- United States Department of Defense
- Harvard Belfer Center
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (United States)
- Center for Strategic Assessment and Forecasts
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