Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 9 · Number 1 · 2023 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Review article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2391342v
Received: 14.12.2022 · Revised: 08.01.2023 · Accepted: 11.01.2023 · Published: 25.03.2023

US-CHINA RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION: A STUDY ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CASE

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Abstract: *Southeast Asia is one of the places where fierce rivalry is taking place between the two leading powers in the world today - the US and China. The US-China rivalry in this region takes place in key fields, from politics - diplomacy, economy, security - defense to "soft power", the most prominent of which is the South China Sea issue. This article analyzes the strategic importance of the South China Sea in the policy of the US and China, the competition between the US and China in Southeast Asia in general, and the South China Sea in particular. To achieve this goal, the authors use research methods in international relations to analyze the main issues of the study. In addition to reviewing previous scholarly research and reviews, the authors use a comparative approach to assess the interactions between theory and data. The authors believe the data is important for accurately assessing the strategic competition between the US and China in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. The rise of China in the early years of the XXI century strongly influenced the adjustment of the US policy in Southeast Asia and the powerful US-China rivalry in this region and the South China Sea. This rivalry is becoming increasingly complicated, and geopolitical conflicts between major powers are possible in the following years.*

Keywords: *China; Rivalry; Southeast Asia; South China Sea; US*

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, although the level of "hot and cold" has occasionally been different, the US-China strategic competition is still the main axis that governs the current international political "chessboard". Reviewing the development of international relations in the modern era, it can be seen that the evolution of the US-China relationship has always been the main concern of each participant and the international community because of the influences from the relationship between the US and China. This is the world's most important bilateral relationship in the XXI century between the power that has established its position on the international stage (United States) and the rising power (China). Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has "risen, become prosperous, and is growing stronger" (Beckley and Brands 2022, 2). At his first press conference in March 2021, US President Joe Biden said that China wants to "become the leading country in the world, the richest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world" (Zhou 2022, 27). The US-China relationship has always been at the heart of international relations in recent decades. The relationship between these two powers has been fiercely competitive, from political, economic, cultural, and soft power to military security. Furthermore, Southeast Asia

is also one of the "focal points" of the strategic competition between these two great powers, the US and China.

Located on the southeastern shore of the Eurasian continental strip, directly adjacent to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia has rich natural resources and the world's lifeblood shipping lanes. This area is considered an intersection point, interwoven with the strategic interests of major countries such as the US, China, Russia, Japan, India, etc. Due to the advantages of geostrategic location and special characteristics other natural, economic, and social characteristics, this area has always been an area of competition for influence from many great powers, the most prominent of which are the US and China. Southeast Asia is the epic of this global rivalry, and the region will be considered by the US-China rivalry much more than most ASEAN states recognize or care to admit (Shambaugh 2021, 242). During the Cold War, Southeast Asia was once a hot focal point of the East-West confrontation with the dominance and complex interaction of the Soviet-US-China strategic triangle competition. Southeast Asia became the subject of competition between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China (Heiduk 2021, 132). Since the end of the Cold War, especially since the first decades of the XXI century, Southeast Asia has become increasingly important internationally, not only from a geopolitical and military perspective but also from a geostrategic, geo-economic, and cultural perspective. ASEAN has become an indispensable partner of major countries and international organizations, an important factor in promoting dialogue and cooperation processes at various levels in Southeast Asia, particularly the Indo-Pacific. This is one of the leading reasons why the US and China are increasingly competing strategically to expand their influence in Southeast Asia in the XXI century.

In the US-China strategic competition in Southeast Asia, the East Sea has become an area where these two powers compete fiercely for influence. China increasingly shows its ambition to turn this sea into a "home pond", considering the East Sea a "core interest". China's increase in military potential and aggressive and pressured behavior in territorial and maritime disputes in the East Sea with several Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, etc.) is a major concern for the US, and the US-China conflict is becoming more and more profound. US and China have come to view the South China Sea as center stage for their geopolitical maritime rivalry (Feng and He 2018, 30).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE US-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION

Southeast Asia is an inseparable part of the Asia-Pacific region. It has long been a key strategic area and a disputed place for the influence of cultures and major countries worldwide. From the geostrategic perspective, Southeast Asia is located in an area favorable for international trade and defense, located at the intersection of Asia, the most convenient maritime route from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, between Northeast Asia and the South Pacific (Tran 2002, 60). This area holds a very important position with the seaport system and strait and is one of the key trade routes in the world, including the Strait of Malacca - a key location of the freight sea route from East to West. According to estimates, the maritime route through the Strait of Malacca accounts for a quarter of the world's marine traffic, with more than 60,000 vessels passing through this strait annually (Tarling and Chen 2017, 25). The amount of

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crude oil transported through the Malacca Strait annually usually accounts for 85% to 90% of the total oil volume of the world (US Energy Information Administration, 2017). With the above position, Southeast Asia has become a key "link" of the connection between Asia and Europe, Southwest Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and Northeast Asia, and North America. Since the Cold War's end until now, Southeast Asia has been considered a strategic focus in the policies of the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region.

For the US - first of all, as a sea power geographically surrounded by two oceans (Atlantic and Pacific), the US considered controlling the ocean especially important in controlling the world. In the context of increasing globalization at the beginning of the XXI century, Southeast Asia holds a more important position in the US maritime strategy and sea power. This region continues to be traversed by the world's busiest and most important sea routes. During the early two decades of the XXI century, when the balance of world power was shifting from Europe-Atlantic to Asia-Pacific, the US advocated setting up a new regional cooperation framework in Asia-Pacific in general and Southeast Asia in particular, including ensuring the security of the South China Sea.

Secondly, since the September 11 terrorist attack, which provided a new strategic context for defense ties (Thayer 2010, 16), when the US aggressively implemented its international counter-terrorism strategy, Southeast Asia has become one of the ideal places of refuge for Islamic extremist forces. In that context, the increasing influence of Russia, China, Japan, and India in this region has made the US more concerned. The US has positioned the region as the second front in the global war on terror to avoid losing its influential role in Southeast Asia. The US encourages "cooperation with partners in the region to make concerted efforts to squeeze, constrain, and isolate terrorist groups" (The US White House 2003). The complicated situation of separatist and terrorist forces in this region makes the US aware that the need to engage more deeply in regional affairs is essential to fighting international terrorism.

Thirdly, Southeast Asia has emerged as an attractive region for foreign business, especially China, because it has had more favorable conditions than other countries. Therefore, the US cannot be slower in the economic competition with other major countries, which could destroy opportunities for highly profitable economic businesses from Southeast Asian countries. The US needs to import a wide variety of products from Southeast Asian countries and increase the number of goods exported to countries in the region to ensure benefits not only in economics but also in the political and security realm.

Chinese interests in Southeast Asia are manifested in many fields and aspects. In terms of geoeconomics, with close geographical advantage, being a region with abundant resources and dynamically developing economies, Southeast Asia has long been one of the important economic partners of China, greatly contributing to the development of this country. Dubbed "the factory of the world in the XXI century", China desperately needs a favorable international environment for its exports. Southeast Asia is seen as a large and potential market for China. The top priority of China's foreign policy is maintaining a stable peripheral environment to safeguard normal economic circumstances at home. China regards establishing long-standing and stable good relations with ASEAN as an important factor in attaining this goal (Bert 2003, 112). In terms of geopolitics, in recent years, ASEAN is emerged as one of the most successful regional connection and cooperation organizations, demonstrated by the establishment of the ASEAN

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Community with three pillars (politics-security, economy, and culture-society), which has become an important geopolitical pole in the multipolar world order that is taking shape in the twenty-first century. As a neighboring country with Southeast Asia, China cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to establish its major status here. The once-established dominant influence in Southeast Asia also means that China has built the basis to establish a greater influence in the international arena.

Regarding marine geostrategic, since the financial-monetary crisis of 1997-1998, China has become more aware that they depend on huge into Southeast Asia in matters of security and economic development. China is the second largest oil importer in the world (after the US) and consumes half of the world's cement, a third of iron and steel, a quarter of copper, and a fifth of aluminum. These goods were transported via many choke points in Southeast Asia, such as the Strait of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makasar, as well as other locations in this sea. Moreover, the South China Sea is also the territorial water with abundant oil and gas reserves, so China wants to capture, exploit and use oil and other resources in this region. China wants to monopolize the South China Sea and repel the US's influence here because China believes that if the US increases its influence in the territorial waters, it will threaten China's multifaceted interests, not simply commercial and economic benefits.

As two ambitious powers, the US and China consider Southeast Asia a key location for them to increase their influence and multifaceted interests. To achieve this goal, the US encountered a formidable competitor China, so this country needed to cooperate with Southeast Asia and take advantage of ASEAN countries as a factor for stability and balance of forces in the region, creating as far an American-friendly Southeast Asia as possible, not least becoming China's "backyard", or rather curbing China's rise in its control. Meanwhile, China wants to rely on its superiority and advantages in Southeast Asia to dominate this region, taking a key role here to prevent the US policy of restraint and repel the US's influence to give China a larger role in the international arena. The rivalry between these two great powers in the first two decades of the twenty-first century took place fiercely in many key areas.

About politics and diplomacy - if in the 90s of the XX century, the US seemed to have "neglected" Southeast Asia, then at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this region would become an important "link" in the adjustment of the US global strategy. Since the second term of President George Walker Bush, the US has advocated creating a channel of regular dialogue and promoting policy towards Southeast Asia. In early 2010, the Obama administration announced its re-engagement policy in East Asia. This policy aims to strengthen US diplomatic and security commitments in the region by strengthening bilateral alliances and supporting regional multilateralism. ASEAN's role in regional peace and security has been promoted through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) with partners. The US side also actively participates in ASEAN-led forums and security mechanisms such as ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), etc. The United States has intensified its involvement in key issues in Southeast Asia, especially the East Sea, other non-traditional security issues, and the artificial balance of relations with regional powers. It can be said that the US is gradually returning to Southeast Asia to establish its dominant position in each country in

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the region and ASEAN, thereby grasping the dominant role in regional political and security issues.

On the Chinese side, over the past decade, along with the strong rise, China increasingly attaches great importance to and enhances the role of ASEAN, asserting its interests in ASEAN relations. China-ASEAN cooperation has developed rapidly and has become deeper and deeper. Compared with all other powers outside the region, China is now considered the most active and influential country in the policies and programs in politics and economics. ASEAN economic, security, and diplomacy. On the one hand, China claims to pursue a foreign policy of autonomy, not forming military alliances that oppose each other; on the other hand, China is changing its policy towards multilateral institutions towards actively participating, strongly supporting institutions such as ARF and ASEAN+3. China has established a strategic partnership with ASEAN dedicated to peace and prosperity in the region and engaged in comprehensive cooperation that has seen rapid expansion. Cooperation in East Asia, with the ASEAN and China, Japan, and the ROK as the main players, keeps expanding, leading to greater economic development and political and security trust in the region (Goh and Simon 2008, 148).

Trade and economy are very important areas in the US-China strategic competition. The US economic strategy in Southeast Asia, both in the immediate and long term, aims to turn this region into a Western-style liberalization market in general and to create a market for US high-tech goods in particular. Therefore, the US continues to expand bilateral economic relations with countries in the region while seeking ways to enhance APEC's role in promoting free trade, investment, and development cooperation. In order to create an advantage in competing for economic influence in Southeast Asia, both the US and China are focusing on strengthening economic-trade relations with the region. The rivalry between the US and China to win the Southeast Asian market is becoming increasingly fierce. In addition, the presence of the world's leading major economies in this region also increases the strategic value of ASEAN.

About military and defense - since the Cold War, the US has become the nation holding the largest military role in the world in general, in Asia-Pacific in particular. However, in the first decade after the Cold War's end, when the US reduced its presence in Southeast Asia and pulled its troops from military bases in the Philippines and Thailand, it showed little interest in ASEAN's affairs. China quickly filled the "power gaps" in Southeast Asia. Entering the XXI century, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the global strategic adjustment created a new turning point in the US policy towards Southeast Asia. The US has placed the task of counter-terrorism at the forefront of its foreign policy adjustment to assert its superiority over American interests in Southeast Asia in the early XXI century (Weatherbee 2008, 170). The US returned to Southeast Asia after three decades of "neglect" since its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. The return is based on US strategic considerations at the international level, particularly anti-terrorism. One of the main objectives is to influence China. China's military might pose a short-term danger to the regional balance and the American military's undisputed dominance. China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is developing roles and missions that permit it to project power beyond its territorial sphere of interest into the Western Pacific and South China Sea. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that the strategic intent behind China's development of new capabilities seemed to be "very focused on the United States Navy and our bases that are in that part of the world" (Mullen 2009). In particular, the construction of the Yulin

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Naval Base near Sanya, on Hainan island, provides China with a forward presence to exercise its sovereignty claims over the South China Sea and protect its sea communication lanes through the Malacca and Singapore straits (Thayer 2010, 8).

THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE XXI CENTURY

The Geostrategic Position of the South China Sea

The South China Sea is Southeast Asia's heart (Weatherbee 2008, 142). The International Hydrographic Bureau defines this territorial water as the "semi-enclosed sea"[1] stretching in a Southwest to Northeast direction, whose southern border is 3 degrees South latitude between South Sumatra and Kalimantan (Karimata Straits), and whose northern border is the Strait of Taiwan from the northern tip of Taiwan to the Fukien coast of China (Pumphrey 2002, 230). From a very early age, the South China Sea has become a passageway of maritime trade flows connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In the current development trend, it can be said that the South China Sea has become the "regulating valve" of trade flows, especially the oil transport route between Middle East countries, Africa, and East Asia (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2009, 4). Due to the above advantages, the geostrategist Nicholas Spykman once described it as the "Asiatic Mediterranean" (Kotani 2011).

The South China Sea has a vital importance and geostrategic position not only for the surrounding countries and territories but also for East Asia and the world. First, the South China Sea is located on the arterial maritime route connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean, Europe-Asia, and the Middle East-Asia. Located in the "crossroads" position, controlling the trade route from the Indian Ocean to Northeast Asia or Australia or through the Americas (where there are major economies in the world such as the US, China, Japan, Russia, Canada, South Korea, Australia, etc.), the South China Sea occupies an increasingly important position in planning development strategies of many countries. If taking the South China Sea as the center with a radius of 1,500 nautical miles, there are important ports such as Bangkok, Calcutta, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Taipei, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Nagasaki; within a radius of 2,500 nautical miles, there are more Bombay, Bali, Darwin, Guam, Tokyo, Yokohama, Seoul, etc.

In addition, the South China Sea region also has important straits for many countries and 4 out of 16 strategic roads of the world located in Southeast Asia, such as Malacca, Luzon, Lombok, Sunda, Makascha, and Ombai-Wetar. In particular, the Strait of Malacca (between the Indonesian island of Sumatra, Malaysia, and Singapore) is extremely important because all goods from Southeast Asia and North Asia must pass through the South China Sea. This is also the strait with a bustling number of ships and boats, and the annual amount of oil transported here occupies the second position in the world after the Strait of Hormuz (Iran). The South China Sea is especially important because some of the most frequented sea lanes for global trade, and more than two-thirds of the annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through it. The South China

[1]Following UNCLOS, "enclosed or semi-enclosed sea" means a gulf, basin or sea surrounded by two or more states and connected to another sea or the ocean by a narrow outlet or consisting entirely or primarily of the territorial seas and exclusive economic zones of two or more coastal states.

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Sea connects East Asian economies (China, Japan, South Korea) with Europe and the Middle East (via the Indian Ocean). It is estimated that roughly three-quarters of the annual world oil and natural gas trade passes through the South China Sea, and 80% of China's crude oil imports arrive via its sea lanes (Pradt 2016,139).

Besides its strategic location, the South China Sea also contains rich resources, serving as a basis for economic development for countries in the region. The US Energy Information Administration estimated that the sea contained just 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of gas as commercially viable reserves. Based on what is known about the region's geology, the US Geological Survey estimated yet-to-be-discovered resources at around 11 billion barrels of oil and 4 billion barrels of "natural gas liquids" - making a combined total of 15 billion barrels. The US Geological Survey estimated that undiscovered gas resources could be more significant - between 70 and 290 trillion cubic feet (Hayton 2014, 149). The great benefits and potential for development have stimulated the ambitions of many powers to "control" the South China Sea, making it "stirring" for many decades.

With rich resources, especially the potential for oil and gas, the South China Sea is now becoming a "hot spot" for disputes among the concerned countries, both inside and outside the region, between the expansion and protection of sovereignty is the centerpiece between the intention of monopoly and "freedom of navigation", between China's Belt and Road Initiative and US's Indo-Pacific strategy. In particular, the South China Sea has become a competitive area for traditional influences of the two largest powers in the world today, the US and China.

The US-China Influential Rivalry at the South China Sea

As a sea area playing a vital role in the trading system in Asia-Pacific, the South China Sea is increasingly attracting the attention of countries worldwide because of its rich resources (fisheries, oil gas, energy, etc.) and growth potential. This territorial water has played a major role in facilitating societal interactions in Asian history. During the Second World War, it was a major military theatre; during the Cold War, it became an area for the US's surveillance and containment of China. Since the turn of the millennium, in addition to its importance for facilitating intra- and inter-regional trade routes or Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), this sea has become a field of competition regarding access to and control over both marine and mineral resources (Truong and Knio 2016, 1). Currently, the South China Sea has become a convergence of strategic interests of many countries worldwide, especially the US and China.

For the US - the South China Sea holds the US's significant economic interests. The South China Sea passes more than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage and about one-third of global maritime commerce. Many oil and gas imports to China, South Korea, and Japan pass through the South China Sea (Graham and Tsjeng 2014, 48). The South China Sea contains 3 of the 16 international key waterways the US claims to control: Lombok Strait, Sunda Strait, and Malacca Channel. The country that dominates the South China Sea will have a strong influence over the future of the Western Pacific from the standpoint of military strategy, including control of the important maritime route connecting East Asia and the Middle Eastern oil fields.

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Moreover, with about 50% of the world's goods going through the South China Sea, this sea area has become the "maiden route" of the world's shipping route. About 90% of commercial activities must be transported at sea, of which 45% must go through the South China Sea. Regarding foreign policy, the South China Sea issue gives the United States leverage in discussions and negotiations with China. The US's support for founding principles and the American security shield give many Southeast Asian countries enough motivation to work to strengthen their bilateral ties with Washington, as the South China Sea rivalry represents the most intractable security issue in Sino-Southeast Asian relations. The US role is also seen as supportive of ASEAN's cohesion.

Regarding security, the United States has made or planned several responses to protect American interests in the region. The United States depends on free passage through the waters and airspace of the South China Sea to deploy its armed forces between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Due to the strategic position of this sea area, the US inevitably wants to maintain its leading role and influence in the South China Sea. From President Obama to President Trump, this has been an international issue.

For China, the South China Sea has an important position because it is located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which is a strategically important region, the port of mainland China to the outside world. This is a very rich area of oil and gas resources. According to estimates by The US Energy Information Administration, the South China Sea can hold 11 billion barrels (1.7 billion tonnes) of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet (5.4 trillion cubic meters) of natural gas hydrocarbon reserves (Raditio 2019, 70). The South China Sea has important economic, military, and geopolitical significance in China's maritime strategy. Half China's oil consumption is from imports, and 80-90% is imported across the South China Sea (Raditio 2019, 73).

Moreover, the South China Sea is the passage for 80% of oil imports to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, respectively (Rahman and Tsamenyi 2010, 317). So that the South China Sea is the shipping route for nearly all of China's oil imports, the South China Sea has become crucial for China's development. The South China Sea is considered the "throat" of the transportation system not only of China but also of the world. Militarily, it is a defensive area in China's global strategic posture. The South China Sea forms a maritime buffer for the provinces of southern China and would be a key theatre of operations in a conflict over Taiwan with the US. Any effort to blockade China in wartime would also occur in these waters (Fravel 2011, 296).

Regarding geopolitics, the South China Sea provides the shortest access to connect the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. The strategic importance of the South China Sea for China's development propels Beijing to develop its navy southward instead of eastward. The domination in the South China Sea benefits Beijing not only in securing its development but also in consolidating its centrality in Asia (Raditio 2019, 77).

From the beginning of the XXI century, the US and China tried to compete with each other to affirm their position, role, and influence in the world. The South China Sea represents a microcosm of the growing China-US rivalry across the politics-diplomatic, economic, and military spheres, especially regarding contrasting interpretations of the rules-based order and international law (Bosbotinis 2021). The influential rivalry became more and more fierce in the first two decades of the XXI century as China increasingly expressed its ambition to turn the

South China Sea into its "home pond" and considered this sea to be on par with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang - territories that China has always considered the nation's inseparable and in need of protection at all costs. China's increased military-defense potential, coupled with China's aggressive and pressuring actions in territorial disputes in the South China Sea with several Southeast Asian countries, is a concern with the US, and the conflict between the two countries in the military field is deepening.

In April 2001, a US EP-3 Orion spy plane collided with a Chinese J-8 fighter jet off the southern coast of Hainan island in China's exclusive economic zone. In March 2009, the Pentagon accused five Chinese civilian ships of "tracking" and "obstructing" the USNS Impeccable of the US while conducting a military survey about 120 km south of Hainan island. This incident led to fierce controversy between the governments of the US and China. The former US National Intelligence Director Admiral Dennis Blair called China's harassment of the USNS Impeccable (Graham and Tsjeng 2014, 49). The US maintains that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) permits freedom of navigation for aircraft and ships, including military means at sea, of all countries, including the exclusive economic zones of the coastal countries.

On the contrary, China argues that UNCLOS only allows the harmless passage of other countries and allows coastal states to prohibit military activities in its exclusive economic zone. However, the profound meaning of invoking different interpretations of the article in UNCLOS is the calculations and actions of the two powers. The US relies on a lack of transparency in China's military operations and therefore needs to deploy spy planes and ships near the coast of Hainan island, where China's major submarine base is located. On the other hand, China argues that it has the right to protect its military activities from foreign scrutiny.

In the early XXI century, China consolidated and expanded its illegally occupied positions on the Paracel and Spratly islands archipelagos. China built the Paracel islands into a strong naval, army, air force, and submarine base; to build the shoals and reefs they occupied in the Spratlys into artificial islands and solid bases. The Beijing government has built a fleet of the world's most technically advanced marine dredgers. Since 2002, the accretion of artificial islands in the South China Sea has increased. China has built military bases on artificial islands to serve its expansion ambitions. China's increased military-defense potential, coupled with China's militarization in the South China Sea and its tough claims, have intensified the confrontation between China with the US and some countries in this region. The US has responded to China's naval build-up by deploying thirty-one of its fifty-three fast attack submarines to the Pacific. Eighteen of these subs are home-ported in Pearl Harbor; others are based in Guam. The US has also deployed three Ohio-class nuclear submarines to the Asia-Pacific Indian Ocean region. Each has been modified to carry 154 conventional Tomahawk cruise missiles. In addition, the US has begun to station the fifth-generation Raptor aircraft in Hawaii (Thayer 2010, 36).

China has consistently stated that it prefers to hold bilateral talks with each claimant and opposes "multilateralization" or "internationalization" of issues about the South China Sea, such as sovereignty disputes, sovereignty rights, and jurisdictional rights with coastal countries (including Vietnam). For the US, the policy for the South China Sea includes two elements. First, the United States takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea. Second, maintaining freedom of navigation is a fundamental US national

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interest. The United States maintains that states may not restrict military survey operations within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Graham and Tsjeng 2014, 49). The US supports dispute resolution by international law and multilateral cooperation. In his speech at the June 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue meeting in Singapore, the former US Secretary of Defense R. Gates focused on America's enduring commitments to Asia. He re-stated the US position on the South China Sea, saying, "We have a national interest in freedom of navigation, in unimpeded economic development and commerce, and respect for international law" (Gates 2014). In a meeting with ASEAN leaders in early 2016 to express US concerns, US President Barak Obama said: "We discussed the need for tangible steps in the South China Sea to lower tensions, including a halt to further reclamation, new construction and militarization of disputed areas. Freedom of navigation must be upheld, and lawful commerce should not be impeded" (US Office of the Press Secretary 2016).

The South China Sea has become the focal point in the comprehensive US-China strategic rivalry and the center of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Under President Obama, the South China Sea issue is considered and enhanced through the presence and cooperation with countries in the region. President Donald Trump's administration has adopted a more forceful and uncompromising stance toward the South China Sea dispute than President Obama's. To prevent China's ambitions in the South China Sea, on 15 May 2018, President Donald Trump approved the US Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2018-2019, which identifies multiple measures to neutralize China's illegal militarization in these waters. The law specifically requires the US Department of Defense to report on China's illegal militarization of the South China Sea regularly, to use all reasonable efforts to stop China from engaging in any reclamation or reclamation activities in the region, to withdraw all weapons from the area via a suitable route within four years, and to forbid China from taking part in RIMPAC, the largest international naval exercise in the Asia-Pacific. These are measures unprecedented in the US legislative system.

Since 2017, the US military has significantly increased its operations' frequency, scope, and intensity in the South China Sea region. Since Donald Trump took office, the American military has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) 15 times in the South China Sea. In this year alone, the Pentagon has dispatched one or two destroyers to the territorial seas or the adjacent waters of China's Xisha (Paracels), Nansha (Spratlys), and Zhongsha islands (Scarborough Shoal) six times without the permission of Beijing. In addition to these so-called FONOPS, the US military's underwater forces and airpower have also frequently conducted close reconnaissance against China in the South China Sea. According to incomplete statistics, American B-52 bombers deployed in Guam flew to the Vietnamese Sea at least 16 times last year to carry out military missions, about four times the frequency compared to 2017 statistics (Shicun2019).

The FONOPs are designed to maintain freedom of movement at sea. It is commensurate with the US national interest. However, in the garb of these operations, the US' objective appears to be the freedom of navigation for its warships, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) vessels. The US Navy constantly conducts so-called "presence" patrols in the SCS. In mid-April of the same year, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced that the United States and the Philippines had begun joint naval patrols. The US Navy has an average of

two or more ships patrolling the SCS. The US conducted four FONOPs between October 2015 and October 2016.

The Trump administration conducted the first freedom of navigation operation on 24 May 2017 (Anwar 2017, 47). Moreover, on 12 November 2017, the US, India, Japan, and Australia revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to realize the Washington administration's Indo-Pacific strategy to control China's ambitions in the Belt and Road Initiative. To be ready to deal with US actions in the South China Sea, on 4 January 2019, the Chinese Central Military Commission convened a Military Work Conference in Beijing. At the meeting, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that China must be ready to deal with acts of war. Also at the conference, Colonel Duey Hooker, Director of the China Institute of Maritime Cooperation and Security Research, suggested that the PLAN should be ready to prevent US warships from exercising freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea is an especially important route for the US defense networks and security links. On the one hand, the US needs to ensure the security of regional allies, including the Philippines and Taiwan, two claimants in the South China Sea. On the other hand, in the context of China's constant military upgrades, the US is interested in securing the rules-based order in the region. In order to increase the US military presence in the South China Sea and curb China's growing influence in this area, the US has continuously expanded its military operations with countries surrounding the South China Sea, joint exercises, increasing military influence over the South China Sea region. The current joint naval exercises are mainly Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), the Southeast Asia Cooperation Training (SEACAT), "Cobra Gold" and "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" (Balikatan), including the navy, army, and air force. The scale of the exercises was constantly expanding, and the exercises' content also gradually evolved from anti-terrorist drills to powerful military attacks such as amphibious landing, surprise hits, and island capture; the practice area was increasingly close to the disputed waters of the Spratly islands. In particular, in September 2019, for the first time, the US Navy and 10 ASEAN countries (including the Myanmar army, which is under US sanctions) held a joint military exercise at Sea (ASEAN - US Maritime Exercise, referred to as AUMX) with the aim *"*not focused or dedicated against or towards anyone else. It is to enhance the skills of ASEAN and the US working together" (Reyes 2019). These exercises have significantly increased the US military presence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea in response to China's "rise", especially as Beijing continues to increase the militarization of the South China Sea, imposing irrational sovereignty over neighboring countries, including Vietnam. In addition, this also promotes dialogue and strengthens cooperation to address regional security challenges facing the region; the plan of action was to implement the ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership 2016-2020 (Zou 2021, 462).

On 1 June 2019, the US Department of Defense officially released its first Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. The essence of this strategy is to strengthen the United States' bilateral alliances and multilateral cooperation mechanisms in economics, security, and maritime affairs to build a collaborative network encompassing South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia. Regarding strategy, the United States has used the South China Sea issue as a wooing mechanism to force countries inside and outside the region to take sides with the ultimate goal of building a military alliance against China in the Indo-Pacific region. Tactically, the US has

increased its unilateral or joint power deployment operations under the Indo-Pacific Strategy framework. This practice has caused the geopolitical rivalry triggered by naval military games between China and the United States to become increasingly fierce and pose new challenges to maritime security in the region (Shicun 2019).

According to the Indo-Pacific Strategy report, the US military currently has over 2,000 aircraft, 200 warships and submarines, and 370,000 military personnel deployed in the Indo-Pacific region. The report contained a plan to purchase 110 fourth and fifth-generation fighters and 400 advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles, among other defense materials suitable for maritime tactics. Additionally, it notes plans to purchase 10 destroyers and ballistic missiles between 2020 and 2024 to improve US capabilities in anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare. The South China Sea and its surrounding areas are the geographical centers of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The US military will inevitably accelerate and intensify its strength deployment, base construction, and forms of military operations in this region (Shicun 2019).

As a result, the simultaneous presence of the US and China in the South China Sea has greatly affected this region. In the complex, changing world and regional situation, with China growing in political position and economic and military power, the countries in the South China Sea are deeply concerned. The presence of the United States in the South China Sea will help the region maintain the status quo following the interests of many sides.

CONCLUSION

Since the Cold War, especially in the early two decades of the XXI century, China has significantly increased and expanded its influence and position in Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia. The rise of this powerful Asian country has strongly influenced world development, changing the global distribution of power. China "is shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere, which will substantially concern the United States. On land and at sea, abetted by China's favorable location on the map, Beijing's influence emanates from Central Asia to the Russian Far East, and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean" (Kaplan 2012, 200). China's rise and growing influence have particularly interested US strategists and many other major countries. The US has always identified itself as a Pacific nation. In November 2009, Barack Obama declared himself "America's first Pacific president" and the US a "Pacific nation" (The US Office of the Press Secretary 2009). The claim that the US "is a Pacific nation rests first on geographical reality. The territorial expansion between the late eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries brought the US from its origins along the Atlantic seaboard across the North American continent to the shores of the Pacific Ocean" (Limaye 2012, 4). Therefore, the US policy towards China has gradually shifted from the "strategic partner" under Bill Clinton to the "direct competitor" in the region under George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump.

On the other hand, as Professor Carlyle A. Thayer (Australian Defense Academy) emphasized: "The aggressiveness and diplomatic tensions that China continues to maintain threatens to keep it diplomatically isolated and undermine the soft power it has established in recent years" (Thayer 2011). The process of power rivalry between the US and China is manifested by hard and soft power, including competition in key areas from economics, military,

and politics to culture. This competitive process has become increasingly fierce and has a far-reaching influence in each region and worldwide in the XXI century.

China's power and influence have grown dramatically in Southeast Asia, threatening US interests in this region. Therefore, the fierce rivalry for power between these countries in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea is inevitable. The South China Sea is the intersection of the interests of major powers in the world (US, Japan) and the "giants" of the continent (China, India). It is associated with countries that are speeding fast development (Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore). Whichever country controls these semi-enclosed seas will influence trade routes and a secure zone from which to launch a submarine strike, which might have an impact on the security, business, economics, and politics of East Asian nations as well as those in the Asia-Pacific. China is a rising power; therefore, if it gains control of the South China Sea, it will no longer be a continental power but also a sea power in the Indo-Pacific. For the US, this territorial water is associated with the most fundamental interests, such as regional peace and stability, the right to the traffic of military ships, and important interests in trade and investment. The Philippines and Australia are two crucial "watchtowers" in the US strategic system, and the US is particularly concerned that if China gains access to the South China Sea, this Asian power will seize the lifeline connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean and run the risk of destroying them. The South China Sea influence disputes between the US and China have grown even more complex, and there is a possibility that a geopolitical conflict will break out in the coming years, given China's strength and increasing assertiveness in claiming sovereignty and the US's desire to maintain its dominant position in Southeast Asia.

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Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

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