

The United States Offshore Balancing in the South China Sea Dispute (2017 – 2021)

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Abstract

The debates about geopolitical competition between major powers in this multipolar world will always consider the presence of the United States and the rise of China. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the implementation of the United States' offshore balancing, especially in the Donald Trump Administration, to contain China in the South China Sea dispute. Although there were previous studies that discuss the United States – China strategic competition in the South China Sea, the time span is limited until 2017, and has not yet reached the specifications for the implementation of the offshore balancing by the United States. Therefore, this study will use the offshore balancing theory to identify the reasons for the United States' deterrence against China. This study will use qualitative–deductive methods and triangulation data analysis techniques from official documents and statements, previous research, or internet sources. This study found that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has caused the implementation of United States' offshore balancing regardless of geographical distance. Guided by the Freedom of Navigation Operations that escalated during Trump's, offshore balancing was implemented by encouraging other countries to control China in the South China Sea dispute, and to intervene only when necessary.

Keywords: *The United States, China, South China Sea, Offshore Balancing.*

INTRODUCTION

The term of “great power rivalry”, which refers to the competition between major powers in the world, has occurred throughout history with varying intensities. John, J. Mearsheimer (2001) explains that this phenomenon happens because major powers tend to have the capability to do anything in order to achieve their national interests, by maximizing their own relative strength (Mearsheimer, 2001). This leads to the continuous competition because of the desire to become the strongest country among major powers, or even to become a “hegemon”, or the only major power in the system. This action can be done by changing or maintaining the distribution of world power based on their advantages, by attacking and sacrificing other countries, and also by thwarting competitors who have the intention to gain power (Mearsheimer, 2001). The “great power rivalry” in the contemporary system is currently happening with the United States (U.S.) and China as the main actors.

In response to the U.S. – China rivalry, several literatures have emerged focusing on the implementation of U.S. security policy to contain the rise of China. One of which is Alenezi (2024), who discusses the U.S. rebalance strategy to Asia in its efforts to contain China's offensive strategy in the South China Sea (SCS). However, his study has limitations where it only focuses on the period 2009 – 2016 during the Obama era. Previous studies also discussed the U.S. foreign policy with a focus on utilizing and enhancing alliances, and through specific security strategies, such as liberal hegemony, counterbalancing, and utilizing structural hegemony. For example, Le Lan Anh, Nguyen Tuan Anh, and Phan Thuy Linh (2023) emphasized the increase in the U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). On the other hand, this study also seeks to investigate the implication of U.S. – China strategic competition on the U.S. security policy. The main difference about this study is that it focuses on the implementation of offshore balancing as the U.S. security strategy to contain China in Asia through SCS dispute. Moreover, this study will

underline the shift that occurred in the U.S. approach on how it views and manages its global role.

Since the Cold War ended, the U.S. has been the only major power that achieved its status as a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, the U.S. policymakers believe that they have the right, responsibility, and also the power to promote a world order based on their views (Palihapitiya, Calacanis, Sacks, & Friedberg, 2024). However, in Donald Trump's Administration in 2017, the U.S. foreign policy has shifted towards a more unilateral and protectionist way. The U.S. has placed domestic interests above international commitments through its 'America First' national security strategy (The White House, 2017). But the main goal of the U.S. national interest is challenged by China as the dominant "rising power" actor in Asia that could threaten U.S. hegemonic globally.

Over the past few years, China has succeeded in building a larger economy and stronger military. As China's economic power increases, it can be transformed into a military force – such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – and it is trying to dominate Asia and increase its role on the international stage. According to Mearsheimer, this is unacceptable for the U.S., because they do not tolerate peer competitors and another regional hegemon in the world (Palihapitiya, Calacanis, Sacks, & Friedberg, 2024). The increase in China's power can also be identified through the country's increasing assertiveness in the disputes that occur in the SCS.

China views the SCS as part of its strategic interests and national sovereignty. China has taken various steps to strengthen its claims, marked by the land reclamation and large-scale militarization – which contrary to Xi Jinping's promise not to militarize the islands (Heriawan, 2022). These actions could threaten the sovereignty of other countries in the region, especially other SCS claimant countries. However, none of them have taken any definite action to balance China. By 1982, the United Nations (UN) had adopted an international agreement that regulates the rights and responsibilities of countries regarding the use of the world's oceans, which is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This convention has regulated islands, rocks, and tidal elevations as three maritime features; and territorial seas, additional zones, and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) as three maritime zones (Freund, 2017).

Under the rules of international law and practice, the U.S. has consistently opposed China's excessive maritime claims that are inconsistent with UNCLOS provisions, through the Freedom of Navigation (FON) program which neutrally rejects excessive maritime claims from all countries. The U.S. emphasized that the SCS is an international area that must remain free and open for the benefit of international trade and regional stability. Furthermore, the U.S. also signed UNCLOS and complies with most of the provisions contained, but the Senate never ratified it because it was considered could weaken its sovereignty, and only viewed this Convention as part of "customary international law" (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2018).

The U.S. has prioritized several actions as part of the FON program, which are implementing diplomatic communication, bilateral and multilateral consultations, and operational statements in the form of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) (Freund, 2017). FONOPs can be conducted by sailing in areas that are excessively claimed by a country and conducting activities that are not in accordance with innocent passage. As O'Rourke (2024) explains in his Congressional Research Service report, FONOPs are designed not only to challenge excessive maritime claims but also to reaffirm international law under the UNCLOS (O'Rourke, 2024).

Based on a research conducted by Christian Wirth and Valentin Schatz from the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in August 2020, the U.S. FONOPs in the SCS under President Obama were conducted six times through 2013 – 2016, meanwhile under President Donald Trump, the U.S. FONOPs in the SCS were conducted 23 times through 2017 – 2020 (Wirth & Schatz, 2020). The significant increase in FONOPs between those two

administrations indicates a more assertive pursuit of the U.S. national interests and a more serious stance toward China in the SCS.

The U.S. – China rivalry in the SCS has caused the implementation of the U.S. security policies that seek to ensure its military superiority (The White House, 2017). This is done by adopting offshore balancing as a strategic concept to address increasing geopolitical complexity. This requires the U.S. to abandon most of its efforts in the hegemonic liberal grand strategy that has been maintained by its country for years. This strategic orientation is closely linked to the concept of offshore balancing, which Mearsheimer and Walt (2016) argue allows the U.S. to conserve resources by avoiding overextension while still countering rising powers in critical regions. The U.S. will encourage other countries to control the rising power at the three most important regions, which are Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, and intervene only if necessary (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). In line with this, Layne (1997) previously noted that offshore balancing requires the U.S. to rely on regional allies as the first line of defense, intervening directly only when the balance of power is threatened (Layne, 1997).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, which, according to Lamont (2015), is appropriate for exploring exploring and understanding the complexity of a social phenomenon by using non-numerical data collection and analysis techniques. Furthermore, this study uses a deductive method to analyze the implementation of security policy by the U.S. to contain the rise of China in SCS. This study will explore, present and describe data in narrative form, which will then be explained explanatory to describe the causal relationship of the research variables. Furthermore, this study will focus on the case of the U.S. – China strategic competition in the SCS and its implications for the U.S. security policy. This study focuses on the period 2017 – 2021, where this period is the peak of the U.S. intervention marked by the highest intensity of military operations compared to the period before or after. The type and source of data in this study will use primary data that will be gathered from the official documents from formal U.S. institutions and official statements from related parties. In addition, secondary data will also be used to complement this research which is gathered from previous research, scientific journals, also articles and reports from official institutions. In analyzing, this study will use the triangulation method, which is carried out by combining data that has been obtained from various sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The South China Sea Dispute.

The SCS is a semi-enclosed sea on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, which is the location of a dispute over the delimitation of islands, coral reefs, and waters. This dispute has caused geopolitical instability due to overlapping jurisdictional claims between the "five primary claimant states", namely China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. These countries are competing for claims over ownership of the sea & hydrocarbon and fishery resources, which are estimated to have 11 billion barrels of oil, 190 trillion natural gas, and fishery resources that reach 10% of the contribution to global fish needs (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). In addition, about one-third of the world's maritime trade is carried out through the SCS region, and 50 percent of the total oil and gas tankers from the Middle East pass through this route on their way to China, Japan, the US, and other countries (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2018).

The claim to the SCS was first made by China under the rule of the Kuomintang nationalist party in 1947, by limiting its territorial claim through the publication of an “eleven-dash line” administrative area map (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This claim is based on historical reasons as the first country to discover “Nanhai Zhudao” or islands in the South China Sea, namely Spratly Island (Nansha), Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha), Paracel Island (Xisha), and Pratas Island (Dongsha) (Peiwu, 2020). However, since the leader of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong declared the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) removed part of the area covering the Gulf of Tonkin and changed its territorial claim to the “nine-dash line” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). The “nine-dash line” claim is considered to have been recognized by the international community because there were no questions or objections from other parties for decades. Until the 1970s, countries around the SCS began to claim areas in the SCS, including islands and water zones (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

After three decades of negotiation, the third and final UNCLOS was formed in 1982 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This convention created a resolution on the rights and responsibilities of countries in the use of waters around their territory based on the EEZ and continental shelf. UNCLOS came into force in 1994 as a legal framework for maritime jurisdiction and maritime activities, although it does not address sovereignty issues specifically related to the SCS. On the other hand, the U.S., which has signed UNCLOS, has not ratified it and only considers the convention as customary international law. This indicates an effort to expand the economic and strategic interests of its country (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

In response to the escalation of the conflict in the SCS, China reached an agreement with the U.S. in the first bilateral military agreement between the two countries, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement in 1998 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This agreement was essentially intended to normalize the U.S. – China relations after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, as well as to improve maritime security and discuss maritime security-related issues. In addition, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also reached an agreement in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on the non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS to establish a framework for negotiating a Code of Conduct in the SCS in 2002 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). However, due to the escalation of the conflict which has not subsided, the U.S. in 2015 sent a U.S. Navy patrol and began the first FONOPs in the SCS (International Crisis Group, 2021).

China’s Foreign Policy in the South China Sea

In general, China’s actions in the SCS have used military and economic coercion to bully its neighbours, make unlawful maritime claims, threaten maritime shipping lanes, and destabilize regions along China’s periphery (United States Department of States, 2021). Under the One Belt One Road or Belt & Road Initiatives (BRI), aligned with its increasing economic and security interests, China has sought to expand its military footprint around features in the SCS. China has actively conducted military exercises, sent patrol vessels, and built military posts and airstrips on several features in the SCS (United States Department of States, 2021). In particular, China has sought to build global logistics and basing infrastructure to enable the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances (United States Department of States, 2021).

Based on a report from the Congressional Research Service (2024), China's dominance over control over areas in the SCS can help China to do several things, including: (1) controlling fishing operations, oil and gas exploration activities, and submarine internet cable installation operations in the SCS; (2) coercing, intimidating, or exerting political pressure on other countries bordering the SCS; (3) announcing and enforcing an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS; (4) announcing and enforcing a maritime exclusion zone, namely a blockade around Taiwan; (5) facilitate the projection of China's military presence and political influence further

into the Western Pacific; and (6) help achieve the broader goal of becoming a regional hegemon in the Eurasian region (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Even after the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which ruled in favor of the Philippines in January 2013, China's claims and expansionary activities in the SCS remain assertive. The tribunal was established under UNCLOS and sought to clarify resource rights, stating that China's maritime claims in the SCS have no clear legal basis. The tribunal also stated that China's "nine-dash line" claim based on historical rights was abolished when China ratified UNCLOS in 1966 (Kuok, 2019). A year after the ruling was issued, in 2017 China again strengthened its maritime claims and control in the SCS, which was marked by: (1) violating the EEZ of coastal countries; (2) increasing its military presence around features in the SCS; and (3) refusing the U.S. and other warships to exercise navigation and other maritime freedoms in accordance with innocent passage rights (Kuok, 2019). Although on September 25, 2015, Xi Jinping stated at the White House that China has no intention of militarizing the Spratly Islands, and that China's outposts will not target or influence any country, the actions that have occurred are highly contradictory (Ortagus, 2020).

With the competitive of the U.S. – China relationship taking place, China also deployed warships to scout within 45 yards of the USS Decatur conducting FONOPs in the Spratly Islands (Kuok, 2019). This happened even as the U.S. Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of National Defense had signed a memorandum of understanding governing the behavior for the safety of air and maritime encounters between the two countries in November 2014. China's assertiveness in defending its maritime claims in the SCS is also carried out by reclaiming land by turning rocks and coral reefs into artificial islands. China has also militarized these features, including by deploying anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles and electronic jammers to Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands in 2018 (Kuok, 2019). Furthermore, since the Covid-19 pandemic, tensions in the SCS have increased as China's assertiveness in its claims and the U.S. – China relations have worsened.

The United States Foreign Policy in the South China Sea

Since President Donald Trump was elected as the U.S president, the approach of the U.S. foreign policy has undergone quite significant changes in various fields, including economics, politics, security, and technology. Most of the U.S. policy towards China since 1979 is based on the strategy of "engagement" (The White House, 2020). However, during the Trump administration in 2017, China has effectively changed its approach by abandoning "peaceful rise" and "good neighbour" diplomacy for the sake of achieving the "Chinese Dream" (Gerval & Henderson, 2022). This resulted in Trump changing the U.S. policy towards a direction that tends to be tougher with the strategy of "strategic competition" (Weatherhead East Asian Institute, 2024). In a speech in July 2020 entitled "Communist China and the Free World's Future", the U.S. Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo emphasized that the U.S. condemns China's actions and calls on all Chinese citizens and democracies around the world to pressure China for its unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and aggressive actions in the South China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

In general, the U.S. competitive approach towards China has two main objectives, namely to enhance the resilience of the U.S. institutions, alliances, and partnerships to respond to the challenges presented by China; and to compel China to stop or reduce actions that are detrimental to the U.S. vital national interests and the interests of the U.S. allies and partners (The White House, 2020). Specifically, in responding to China's assertiveness in the SCS, the U.S. seeks to: (1) prevent China from building additional bases and moving military instruments to its bases in the SCS; (2) start island or base construction activities on Scarborough Shoal in the SCS; (3) declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS; and (4) encourage China to adopt the principle of 'freedom of the seas' according to the U.S., and accept and comply with the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision; and (5) maintain a regional balance of power that

benefits the U.S. and its allies, and prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon in East Asia (O'Rourke, 2024).

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) prioritizes long-term competition with China, emphasizing modernization and partnerships to counter the PLA's technological advancements, power development, and increasing international presence and assertiveness. In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense is also working on several things to deter and counter the PLA's rise and Chinese ambitions, including increasing investment in cyber and space (The White House, 2017). As part of his FON, Trump in 2018 invited the PLA to participate in the biennial Rim of the Pacific exercises due to China's deployment of advanced missile systems to man-made features in the SCS (The White House, 2017).

Trump also announced that the U.S. would impose tariffs on foreign-made steel and aluminium. The government imposing restrictions on China but excluded Canada and other countries that sided with the U.S., as well as the European Union (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). In early April 2018, China also imposed retaliatory tariffs on the U.S. products which escalating the trade war between the U.S. and China. The trade war tensions between the two countries remain escalating until at the G20 meeting in Buenos Aires in early December 2018, Trump and Xi Jinping agreed to a 'truce' to reach a broader trade deal within 90 days (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). However, in May 2019, when trade talks between the U.S. and China failed to reach an agreement, the trade war between the two countries escalated again.

More broadly, the U.S. is seeking to offset China's economic influence while reducing dependence on Chinese supply chains and limiting the U.S. economic capacity to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific affected by the U.S. – China trade war. This is done by increasing its economic relations with ASEAN member countries, especially Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, through bilateral trade agreements, as well as investment and economic assistance offered as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

The Regional Balance of Power in the South China Sea

The regional balance of power in the SCS is influenced primarily by the military capacity of each country involved in the conflict. The military capacity can be in the form of a defense budget, military capacity including the availability of personnel, military equipment and vehicles, and the population size which is one of the driving factors of the aggregate power instrument owned by a country.

Table 1.

| Military Ranking | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Defense Budget (USD) | | Tiongkok | Other Claimant States | | | | |
| | | | Filipi na | Vietnam | Malaysia | Brunei | Taiwan |
| | | \$198.538.361.427 | \$4.38 0.000. 000 | \$8.594.0 00.000 | \$4.800.000 .000 | \$613.7 91.862 | \$19.740 .000.00 0 |
| Human Resources | Population | 1.415.043.270 | 118.2 77.06 3 | 105.758. 975 | 34.564.810 | 498.94 9 | 23.595. 274 |
| | Available Manpower | 764.123.336 | 50.85 9.137 | 54.994.6 67 | 16.245.461 | 227.70 0 | 12.269. 542 |
| | Active Personnel | 2.035.000 | 150.0 00 | 600.000 | 113.000 | 8.000 | 215.000 |
| | Reserve Personnel | 510.000 | 1.200. 000 | 5.000.00 0 | 51.600 | - | 2.310.0 00 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------|-------------|------------------|---------|--------|--------|--------|-----|--------|
| Military | Air Force | Total Aircraft | 3.309 | 202 | 246 | 135 | 27 | 761 |
| | | Fighter | 1.212 | 0 | 41 | 26 | 27 | 285 |
| | Army | Tank | 6.800 | 10 | 1.374 | 48 | ??? | 888 |
| | | Armored Vehicle | 144.017 | 11.878 | 11.912 | 13.506 | 45 | 19.921 |
| | | Artillery | 4.490 | 306 | 575 | 196 | - | 1.848 |
| | | Rocket | 2.750 | 0 | 474 | 36 | ??? | 234 |
| | Navy | Total Assets | 754 | 113 | 110 | 100 | ??? | 97 |
| | | Aircraft Carrier | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | Warship | 169 | 3 | 25 | 8 | 22 | 33 |
| | | Submarine | 61 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| | | Patrol Vessel | 150 | 58 | 35 | 71 | 4 | 37 |
| | Global Rank | | 3 | 41 | 23 | 42 | - | 22 |

Based on the table above, the defense budget of the claimant countries in the SCS dispute is led by China, with a value of around \$198 billion. This figure is far above when compared to other claimant countries, where the average of these countries is only around \$5 - \$20 billion. Meanwhile, Brunei, the defense budget owned by its country is the smallest, which only reaches \$614 million. Based on the number of human resources, China is still superior compared to the other five SCS claimant countries. China is recorded as having a population of around 1.4 billion, which is also ranked first as the country with the largest population in Asia, and second in the world after India. Meanwhile, for the other five claimant countries, the population figures only range from 490 million - 118 million people.

From the military sector, the number of military forces owned by China from the Air Force, Army, and Navy is far above other STS claimant countries. The number of fighter planes owned by China is around 1.2 thousand with a total number of aircraft of almost 3.4 thousand. Meanwhile, other STS claimant countries are only at 135 - 761, and Brunei only has 27 fighter planes. In terms of Army strength, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia have quite a large number of armed forces, but it is still very far from the number of armed forces owned by China. China is recorded as having a total number of tanks of around 6.8 thousand; armored vehicles at 144 thousand; the number of artilleries at 4 thousand, and rockets totalling 2.7 thousand.

China again outperforms other SCS claimant countries in terms of the number of armed forces from its country's Navy. China is recorded as having 754 naval assets, with the number of warships at 169 and patrol ships totalling 150. China is also the only SCS claimant country that has three aircraft carriers. In terms of the number of submarines, China is also superior with 61, while the Philippines and Brunei do not have submarines. Globally, China has occupied the third position in terms of military power owned by its country. Most of the other STS claimant countries are in positions 20 to 42, where Brunei is a country with very small military power and cannot even be classified into a global ranking.

From the data that has been presented, it can be identified that China is de facto in the main position in the disputed area. China has outperformed other South China Sea claimants in terms of defense budget, human resources, and armed forces, including navy, land, and air force.

This indicates that the balance of power present in the source of conflict, namely the South China Sea, is unipolar. China's dominance in aggregate power is the main driving factor behind its aggressive policies towards other claimants in the South China Sea region. This dominance is also aimed at China to consistently maintain its sovereignty and maritime claims on features in the South China Sea, based on what it considers "historical rights".

Geographical Location of the United States and China

The United States

The United States is located in North America, with its capital in Washington D.C. The form of the U.S. is a federal republic, with 50 states directly bordering it that occupy the middle latitudes of the continent, except for the state of Alaska which is located at the North Western tip of North America, and also the state of the Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The states that directly border it are bordered to the north by Canada, to the east by the Atlantic Ocean, to the south by the Gulf of Mexico and Mexico, and to the west by the Pacific Ocean. With a total area reaching 9,866,289 km², the US is the fourth largest country in the world, after Russia, Canada, and China.

The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans bordering the eastern and western parts of the US, protect the country from other countries in Asia and Europe. In addition, the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts also separate the US from Mexico on the southern US border. On the northern border, the great lakes of Lake Superior, Huron, Erie, and Ontario, and the rich forests of Ontario in Canada and the U.S. state of Michigan, have separated the US from Canada. With this, the US has capital, food surpluses, and physical isolation compared to other countries in the world. The US is not important because of 'who they are', but because of 'where they live' (The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2011).

China

China is located in East Asia, with the capital city located in Beijing (Peking). China is the largest Asian country, occupying almost all of the land in East Asia, and covering about a quarter of the Earth's land area, which is almost the same size as all of Europe. China is also the country with the second largest population in the world after India. China's population has reached around 1.42 billion, which is slightly different from India as the country with the largest population in the world which has reached 1.45 billion.

China have 33 administrative units that are directly under the central government, consisting of 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities (Chongqing, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin), and 2 special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau). The capital of China, Beijing (Peking) is the center of culture, economy, and communication, while Shanghai is a major industrial city, and Hong Kong is the commercial and port center.

China borders directly with Mongolia to the north, and with Russia and North Korea to the northeast. In the east, China borders the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, while in the southeast China borders the South China Sea. Countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, India, Bhutan, and Nepal also border China in the south. In addition, in the southwest China borders Pakistan, and in the west with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. In addition to the 14 countries that directly border it, China also faces South Korea and Japan, across the Yellow Sea, and the Philippines, which is located across the South China Sea.

China is one of the countries with a long history that is currently still experiencing rapid economic and cultural development in the early stages of world civilization. China's isolationism has enabled China's rapid development, where since the mid-19th century, China has experienced "a century of humiliation" because it is relatively weaker than other foreign countries. This led to a revolution that resulted in the formation of a communist government in 1949, and changed world geopolitics and increased China's influence globally. The form of the Chinese state was initially a unitary state with provinces or sheng (secretariat) as the center of the country's political

and economic authority. However, since the founding of the PRC, provincial powers have been limited by the central leadership.

The Distance between the United States and China

The distance between the U.S. and China generally spans the shortest distance of 11,000 to 12,000 kilometers. Areas to fly through on a direct flight path from the U.S. West Coast to China will most likely pass through the North Pacific Ocean; over southern or central Alaska; to the Bering Strait which is located between Alaska and Russia, or directly into Russian territory; Eastern Russia (Eastern Siberia); may cross through Mongolia; and eventually entering Chinese airspace.

As for the nearest shipping routes, the areas to pass through from the U.S. West Coast to China will most likely head to west across Northern Pacific Ocean; following the Great Circle Route; approaching East Asia, that will typically cross Sea of Japan; or can also pass through the Philippine Sea; Taiwan Strait; the East China Sea; and also able to pass through the SCS. The shortest distance and the shortest sailing time are estimated to reach 5,200 – 5,500 nautical mile and 11 – 14 days.

CONCLUSION

From the previous explanation, it can be identified that the U.S. and China are not directly adjacent geographically and located very far away from each other. It can also be identified that that the two countries are separated by a very large ocean, which is the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the U.S. will ideally implement a buck-passing strategy. This strategy is theoretically implemented because it is relatively cheaper, less prolonged, and more efficient in terms of resources. However, the increase in the U.S. FONOPs and policies implemented by Trump indicates further engagement with China in the SCS.

Apart from that, the regional balance of power in the SCS is dominated by China. Even though other claimant countries in the SCS such as Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia also have sufficient capacity in terms of defense budgets or human and military resources, China still outperforms them by a far margin. Therefore, the balance of power in the SCS can be classified as an unbalance multipolar, with China as the dominant actors. This also indicates, along with China's assertiveness increases in the SCS, that the local power, which are the other five claimant states, can't withstand China as a threat. Thus, the U.S. as the distant hegemon, will ideally implement a balancing strategy by weakening them and rearrange the balance of power in the SCS.

The U.S. implemented the offshore balancing to prevent the emergence of China as a new hegemon in East Asia. The U.S. will try to stay offshore as long as possible, and only intervene only when necessary. The U.S. offshore balancing is implemented by depending and supporting their allies and partners in the SCS region. This allows the U.S. to not have to be permanently present at every point, but still maintain strategic influence and maintain its hegemon status in the Western Hemisphere.

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