

Rationality Of The United States (Us) Conflict With China In The South China Sea In The Framework Of Chicken Game Theory

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Abstract

As a major maritime route rich in resources and crucial for global trade, the South China Sea has become a flashpoint for conflicting interests between the United States (US) and China. China seeks to expand its influence through military infrastructure development and territorial claims with the nine-dash line, while the United States supports freedom of navigation and alliances with regional countries to counter Chinese influence. The strategic choice between increased military presence or limited cooperation to maintain stability is a key dilemma in the relationship between the two countries. Using the Chicken Game analysis model from Game Theory variations, this study aims to identify and answer the question of why the United States and China choose confrontational strategies such as increasing their military capabilities in the South China Sea, despite the risk of escalating to open war. This research is expected to contribute to an understanding of how competing US-China interests in the South China Sea can influence regional instability and highlight strategic dynamics in the region.

Keywords: *US-China Rivalry, South China Sea, Chicken Game Theory*

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) holds significant strategic value for both China and the United States (US). This region serves as a major international trade route, connecting East Asia with Southeast Asia and other regions. Approximately 40% of the world's liquefied natural gas passes through the South China Sea, and trade through this route reaches US\$3 trillion annually, or one-third of total global trade. China claims almost the entire South China Sea based on its Nine-Dash Line. This claimed South China Sea area was first drawn by Chinese cartographers in 1929, based on old British nautical charts. The line encompasses over 90% of the South China Sea, which falls under Chinese territory (Al Jazeera, 2023). Furthermore, China views the South China Sea as a key defense barrier to strengthen its national security against potential external threats (Raditio, 2019). China's construction of artificial islands and strengthening its military presence in the South China Sea are considered by the US and other countries to be a threat to freedom of navigation and regional stability. This triggered a series of responsive actions by the US, including routine freedom of navigation operations in the region. These US actions aim to assert the right to freedom of navigation and challenge China's territorial claims, which are deemed to violate international law.

Since 2010, the South China Sea has become a strategic extension, ultimately leading to the United States and China seeking dominance in the region (Sudira, 2014). China's growing military and economic modernization in the Asia-Pacific region has caused concern among its neighbors, including the United States, as it is perceived as vulnerable to conflict and has sparked concerns about China replacing the United States as a unipolar power (Muni & Chadha, 2014). In 2020, then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement reinforcing the US stance on the South China Sea disputes. This statement asserted that Beijing's claims to offshore resources in most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful (McLaughlin, 2020). Then, the latest report from VOA that China conducted combat patrols to test "strike capabilities" near coral reefs that are a vulnerable point in the South China Sea, while the United States and its allies held military exercises in the same waters (VOA Indonesia, 2024).

Growing tensions could lead to a greater escalation of conflict, whether in the form of diplomatic disputes, arms races, or open military confrontation. Regional countries, many of whom are economically dependent on China, are also concerned about China's potential dominance in the South China Sea, which could disrupt the balance of power in the region. Furthermore, US intervention in maintaining freedom of navigation could increase tensions and trigger a reaction from China, which could worsen the situation. Therefore, this paper will analyze the rationale behind the US-China conflict in the South China Sea using the Chicken Game framework. In general, this approach will examine the strategic options available to the US and China in the South China Sea, examining the advantages and disadvantages of each. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the implications of the US-China conflict for regional security stability through their confrontational actions.

Through this framework, this study attempts to explain that the dynamics of the conflict in the South China Sea are not solely influenced by military capabilities or geopolitical interests, but also by the rational calculations of each actor in determining the most advantageous strategic choices. From a Chicken Game perspective, both the United States and China are faced with a dilemma between maintaining a confrontational stance to maintain credibility and strategic interests, or choosing a compromise to avoid significantly greater conflict costs. Each of these choices has different consequences for the political position, security, and influence of both countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, an analysis using the Chicken Game is relevant to understanding why both countries tend to maintain a competitive pattern of interaction, while at the same time still trying to avoid direct military confrontation. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of strategic decision-making between the United States and China and its impact on security stability in the South China Sea region, particularly in creating a balance of power and maintaining regional peace amidst the increasing rivalry between the two superpowers.

Schelling (1960) laid the foundation for this approach in *The Strategy of Conflict*, showing how threats, coercion, and credible commitments shape the behavior of states locked in conflict. Building on this foundation, Macey (2014) framed high-stakes confrontations as a form of Chicken Game nested within a broader Prisoners' Dilemma, illustrating how actors weigh the cost of backing down against the risk of mutual destruction. Haun and O'Hara (2022) extended this line of analysis through the Brinkmanship Game, explaining how states bargain under conditions of mutual escalation risk while signaling resolve without crossing the threshold of open war. Within the specific context of US-China relations, Sebayang (2024) applied the Chicken Game framework to explain the rationality behind the US-China trade war, demonstrating that the model is equally relevant to economic as well as military confrontation.

Complementing these theoretical works, Brands and Cooper (2018) examined the strategic options available to the United States in the South China Sea itself, highlighting the trade-offs between assertive posturing and restraint. Building on this body of literature, this study applies the Chicken Game framework specifically to the dynamics of the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of strategic decision-making between the United States and China and its impact on security stability in the South China Sea region, particularly in creating a balance of power and maintaining regional peace amidst the increasing rivalry between the two superpowers.

RESEARCH METHODS

To address the research problem and questions—specifically regarding the interpretation of "Chicken Game Theory" in analyzing the rationality of the conflict between the United States (US) and China in the South China Sea—this study employs a qualitative approach utilizing descriptive analysis techniques. According to Lamont (2015), qualitative research in International Relations enables researchers to understand the meanings, processes, and dynamics shaping various international political phenomena. Meanwhile, descriptive research aims to explain and describe natural and man-made phenomena—ranging from objects, activities, changes, and relationships to the similarities and differences between phenomena (Lamont, 2015). In this context, Chicken Game Theory serves as the analytical framework to examine the "phenomenon": the tension between the US and China's shared interest in avoiding an escalation to open conflict in the South China Sea and the confrontational policy choices they nonetheless persist in maintaining. The study's initial hypothesis posits that both the US and China rationally opt for confrontational strategies to uphold their respective credibility and strategic interests in the South China Sea—rather than choosing compromise—even though such choices carry the risk of escalating tensions into open conflict between the two nations.

Data and facts were collected using internet-based methods. Meanwhile, a review of theoretical literature was obtained from secondary sources, including scientific journals and research reports. This research will also utilize official documents from the countries selected for the study. After obtaining the relevant data, this study employs the illustrative method—a qualitative data analysis technique that takes theoretical concepts and applies them to empirical situations to organize data based on theory (Neuman, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

China's Increasing Military Capabilities in the South China Sea (SCS)

The South China Sea (SCS) is a strategic region that has been at the center of global geopolitical attention for decades. Its importance as the epicenter of potential international conflict involves major powers such as China, the United States, and ASEAN countries. The South China Sea covers approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Approximately one-third of global maritime trade passes through this region, including crude oil and liquefied natural gas. Furthermore, the region is rich in natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, and fish, making it increasingly contested. Several countries claim territory in the SCS, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan (Kaplan, 2011). Approximately one-third of global maritime trade passes through these waters, connecting East Asia with the rest of the world (Al Jazeera, 2021). Any disruption or obstruction to this flow would have a significant impact on global trade, causing ripple effects across supply chains and economies worldwide. Therefore, maintaining open and safe sea lanes in the South China Sea is crucial for the stability of international trade.

According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, every sovereign country can claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of up to 200 nautical miles from its coastal baseline and 12 nautical miles as territorial waters. Therefore, in this zone they have the right to exploit natural resources, carry out marine and fisheries activities, and build artificial islands. The United States believes that countries claiming the SCS under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (several Southeast Asian countries) should have freedom of navigation through the EEZ seas and should not be allowed military threats against these claimant countries. However, the Nine-Dash Line or Nine Dash Line appears on maps published by China to indicate maritime territorial boundaries in the SCS. The line was first demonstrated in 1947, and has been used by China to

justify its claims to the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands and coral islands in the SCS (Johannes, 2023).

The Nine-Dash Line was previously unknown to the international community and has been a source of dispute between several countries in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia (the Natuna Islands). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which China ratified in 1982, does not recognize the right of any particular country to claim sovereignty over all or part of the South China Sea. The Nine-Dash Line has been a source of tension and conflict in the South China Sea for years. In recent years, China has escalated its claims in the South China Sea and has militarized the Paracel Islands and Spratly Reefs. This has led to increased tensions with several countries in the region and is likely to increase the risk of conflict (Johannes, 2023).

To defend and protect its territorial claims, China has been increasing its military capabilities in the South China Sea. Since 2013, China has created 3,200 hectares of new land in the Spratly Islands, building ports, lighthouses, and runways on the newly constructed islands. China now has four outposts with runways totaling 3,050 meters (10,000 feet) in the South China Sea. These outposts are Woody Island in the Paracel Islands and Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), China has deployed significant military assets to the islands, including anti-air and anti-ship missiles, surveillance and communications facilities, and hangars capable of accommodating military transport, patrol, and combat aircraft. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China has the world's largest navy, with a combined combat force of more than 370 destroyers and submarines, including more than 140 combat ships. Furthermore, China's military funding increased by 7.1 percent from 2013 to 2022. The graph below shows China's military budget statistics steadily increasing year after year.

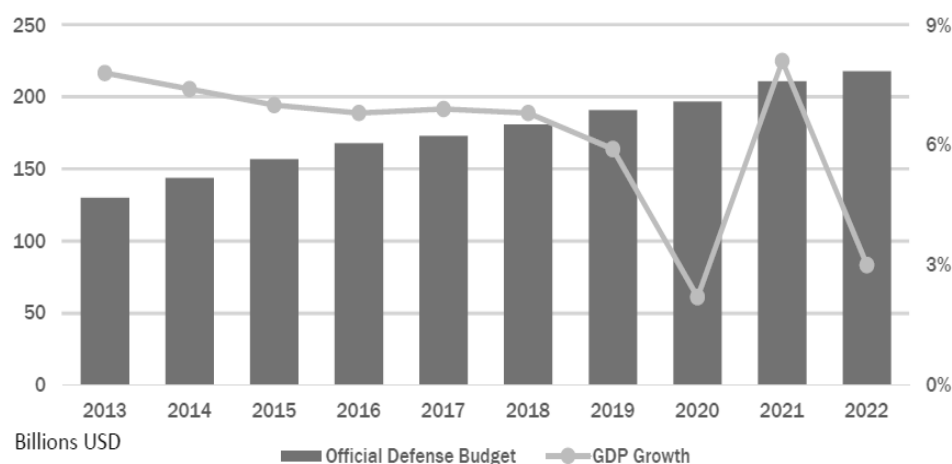


Figure 1.1 China's Military Budget Statistics

Source: U.S. Department of Defense

The data above shows that increasing military capabilities is considered rational and essential to safeguarding the country's national interests. China's increasing military capabilities in general, and specifically in the South China Sea, have been accompanied by several active coercive activities, such as empowering coast guards and maritime militias to harass foreign vessels, imposing restrictions on fishing and resource exploitation, and ignoring legal challenges, such as the 2016 arbitration ruling that largely invalidated the nine-dash line (Brands & Cooper, 2018). According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), these facilities have been equipped with aircraft hangars, surface-to-air missile systems (HQ-9), anti-ship missiles (YJ-12B), long-range radars, and various other military installations that significantly increase China's operational capabilities to maintain its military presence in the South China Sea (CSIS-AMTI, 2024).

This development has raised concerns among other claimant states, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. These countries view China's construction of military installations as a change in the status quo, potentially restricting freedom of navigation and reducing their access to natural resources in the disputed area. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) explains that China's increased military activity has prompted various Southeast Asian countries to increase defense spending, strengthen regional security cooperation, and expand strategic relationships with external countries as a counterbalance to China's growing power (IISS, 2024).

This situation has also prompted the United States to increase its involvement in the South China Sea. Although it has no territorial claims, the United States has a strategic interest in upholding the principle of freedom of navigation, maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region, and ensuring international trade routes remain open in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Therefore, Washington consistently carries out Freedom of Navigation Operations, to strengthen defense alliances with the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, and expand security cooperation through various mechanisms such as the Quad and AUKUS. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2024), this policy is part of the United States' strategy to maintain the balance of power in the region while preventing the dominance of one country over strategic sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific.

As a result, the security dynamics in the South China Sea increasingly exhibit characteristics of a security dilemma, a situation where a country's efforts to improve its security are perceived as a threat by other countries, triggering a response in the form of increased military capabilities. This situation creates a recurring pattern of actions and reactions with no guarantee that increased military strength will result in greater security stability. Conversely, the increased intensity of military patrols, freedom of navigation operations, joint war games, and the presence of combat assets in the region actually increase the risk of misperception, miscalculation, and even unintentional conflict escalation (Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 2010). In this context, the interaction between the United States and China demonstrates that every strategic decision always considers the potential response of the opposing party, making it relevant to analyze it using the Chicken Game approach, which focuses on the rational choices of actors when facing the risk of confrontation with equally high consequences.

The United States' Response to China in the South China Sea

In a report by the Congressional Research Service, last updated in February 2023 on US-China Strategic Competition in the South China Sea (O'Rourke, 2023), the United States' position on issues related to the South China Sea more specifically includes the following elements: 1.1 The United States supports the principle of freedom of the seas, which implies that all States have guaranteed rights, freedoms, and uses of the seas and airspace as enshrined in international law. 1.2 United States forces routinely advocate for freedom of navigation around the world. The United States conducts annual freedom of navigation operations designed to demonstrate that the United States will operate in any waters or airspace where international law permits, regardless of disputed maritime claims, such as in the South China Sea. 1.3 The United States supports territorial claims based on UNCLOS, which regulates economic activity in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of coastal States. The United States continues to operate its military vessels in the EEZs of other States, including in the EEZs surrounding the South China Sea, which remain internationally free navigation zones. This is done legally by the United States under international law to maintain international peace and security, namely Articles 58 and 87 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

In 2023, several US military activities were reported in the South China Sea as part of their commitment to supporting freedom of navigation and opposing China's territorial claims

that violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Further details can be found in the table below, which outlines US activities in the South China Sea in 2023.

Table 1.2 US military activities in the South China Sea in 2023

Date	United States Military Activities
January 26	The aircraft carrier USS Nimitz visited Singapore.
February	USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group conducted comprehensive military exercises in the South China Sea.
February 24	A U.S. P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft flew over the Paracel Islands carrying media journalists.
April 11	The United States and the Philippines conducted the largest-ever Balikatan joint military exercise.
April 16	The USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group entered the South China Sea to conduct operational activities.
April 17	The guided-missile destroyer USS Chung-Hoon visited Subic Bay, Philippines.
June 1	The coast guards of the United States, the Philippines, and Japan conducted a trilateral maritime exercise in the South China Sea.
June 25	The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan visited Da Nang, Vietnam, before entering the South China Sea.
July 6	The United States and the Philippines conducted a joint Marine Corps aviation support exercise.
August 14	The United States hosted the Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) 2023 multilateral maritime security and information-sharing exercise across Singapore, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea, involving 20 Indo-Pacific countries and organizations.
August 24	The United States, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines conducted a joint maritime exercise in the South China Sea.
August 25	The United States, Australia, and the Philippines held their first large-scale joint Island Landing Exercise , involving land, sea, and air operations.
August 31	The United States and Indonesia conducted the Super Garuda Shield joint military exercise, with participation from the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Japan, and Singapore.
September 6	The United States and Canada conducted the Noble Wolverine military exercise in the South China Sea.
September 17	The U.S. Coast Guard and the United Kingdom's Royal Navy conducted a joint exercise in the South China Sea.
October 2	The United States and the Philippines held the 7th Sama Sama joint military exercise in the Philippines, involving eight participating countries: the United States, the Philippines, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and Malaysia.
October 23	The United States, Japan, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand conducted a joint military exercise in the South China Sea.
October 28	The USS Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group visited Manila, Philippines.
November 12	The United States and the Philippines conducted the Kamandag (Sea Warrior Cooperation) Marine Corps exercise involving approximately 2,700 personnel from the United States, the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

November 21	The United States and the Philippines conducted joint maritime and aerial patrols in the South China Sea.
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Source; US Department of Defense (2023)

Furthermore, the US presence in the South China Sea region is intended to secure its maritime trade routes, worth \$208 billion. In 2016, according to the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an estimated \$3.6 trillion worth of goods and commodities passed through the South China Sea. Other estimates put the figure as high as \$5.3 trillion (Martin, 2024). This proves that the South China Sea is a crucial region and cannot be ignored. This value makes the South China Sea one of the world's busiest trade routes (CSIS, 2021). Meanwhile, approximately US\$208 billion in US merchandise trade also passes through this region, making the stability of the South China Sea crucial to US economic interests, particularly in maintaining the smooth flow of trade with its key partners in Asia (CSIS, 2021).

In addition to trade in goods, the South China Sea is also a major global energy distribution route. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) noted that approximately 28 million barrels of oil and petroleum products per day passed through the South China Sea in 2023, or approximately 37% of the world's total seaborne oil trade. Furthermore, the region is also a major distribution route for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). Therefore, any disruption to the stability of the South China Sea will not only impact international trade but also potentially affect the stability of global energy markets. Based on these conditions, the United States' interests in the South China Sea are based not only on geopolitical considerations, but also on economic interests related to the continuity of international trade and energy distribution. Therefore, various military operations, freedom of navigation and other maritime security measures are being implemented. Strengthening defense cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries can be understood as part of the United States' efforts to maintain the security of international shipping lanes, which are one of the main pillars of the global economy (CSIS, 2021).

Analysis of the Rationality of the US-China Conflict in the South China Sea

As previously explained, China's foreign policy choice to support its territorial claims in the South China Sea is to increase its military capabilities and activities. Similarly, US foreign policy in responding to China in the South China Sea is to also increase its military activities. These US and Chinese policies can increase tensions in the South China Sea, which could lead to a greater escalation, such as open warfare. As reported by VOA Indonesia, China conducted combat patrols to test its "strike capabilities" near vulnerable reefs in the South China Sea, while the US and its allies conducted exercises in the same waters. However, both countries continued to choose a confrontational policy, indicating they ignored the potential for open warfare. Therefore, this discussion will explain the rationale analysis of US-China foreign policy in the South China Sea using the chicken game theory.

The chicken game theory illustrates policy choices where two parties can choose to "swerve" or "straight." Each of these strategic choices has different implications. Broadly speaking, the US and China in the South China Sea face two choices: whether to continue the conflict or immediately decide to end it. In a zero-sum calculation, the total of both games results in zero (0). In other words, if one player, for example, suffers a loss of minus two (-2), then the other player will gain plus two (+2). The number minus two (-2) refers to the state's interests not being achieved, and the number plus two (+2) refers to the state's interests being achieved (Sebayang, 2024). In the context of the US-China conflict in the South China Sea, the chicken game projection can be seen as the scenario below;

Tabel 1. Matriks Payoff Chicken Game

Country/Attitude	B	
	Swerve	Straight

A	Swerve	0 0	-2 2
	Straight	2 -2	-5 -5

Source: Processed by the author from various sources

United States

- **Swerve**
 - **Loser (-2):** Fails to defend freedom of navigation and contain China's influence if China continues to fight.
 - **Draw (0):** Both sides de-escalate the confrontation, reducing the risk of conflict if China also swerves.
- **Continue to Straight**
 - **Winner (+2):** Successfully deters China's assertive behavior, protects freedom of navigation, and maintains U.S. strategic influence if China swerves.
 - **Crash (-5):** Military confrontation escalates if China also continues to fight.

China

- **Swerve**
 - **Loser (-2):** China's strategic influence in the South China Sea is constrained if the United States continues to fight.
 - **Draw (0):** Both sides de-escalate the confrontation, reducing the risk of conflict if the United States also swerves.
- **Continue to Stright**
 - **Winner (+2):** China strengthens its strategic influence and reinforces its territorial claims in the South China Sea if the United States swerves.
 - **Crash (-5):** Military confrontation escalates if the United States also continues to fight.

Looking at the scenario above, it is stated that US and Chinese interests are associated with a value of plus 2 (+2). Meanwhile, there are only two possible options: swerve from the street or continue to go straight. Meanwhile, the possible conditions are: winner (+2), loser (-2), draw (0), and crash (-5) (Sebayang, 2024).

It can be seen that the US and China have the opportunity to choose the most rational strategy as their foreign policy orientation. The greatest loss point is the continue to straight stance, with a weight of minus five (-5). However, simultaneously, the possibility of profit is also only available with this stance by becoming a winner (+2). Furthermore, the lowest risk level is the swerve stance. However, this stance has no possibility of winning and the best possibility is a draw (0). In other words, a swerve stance only presents disadvantages for both the United States and China, as their respective strategic interests in the South China Sea cannot be optimally achieved. The United States has an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation, ensuring the security of international trade routes, and limiting the expansion of China's strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, China has an interest in upholding its historical claims through the nine-dash line, strengthening its military position, and expanding its geopolitical influence in the South China Sea. Therefore, choosing a straight strategy offers a greater opportunity for each party to achieve the desired outcome (winner payoff). However, if both countries simultaneously choose a straight strategy, the consequence will be a crash, increasing the likelihood of direct military confrontation. Within the framework of the Chicken Game, this situation is the worst outcome because the political, economic, and military costs to both parties far outweigh the potential benefits. Thus, each strategic choice carries a dilemma. Giving in means losing a strategic position, while continuing to advance opens the possibility of open conflict.

This dilemma demonstrates that the interaction between the United States and China cannot be understood as either fully cooperative or fully confrontational. Instead, both countries

are in a situation where they are testing each other's credibility and commitment. The greater a country's ability to convince its opponent that it will not back down, the greater the opportunity for that country to force its opponent to swerve. Therefore, various activities such as Freedom of Navigation, joint military exercises, aircraft carrier deployments, military base construction, and increased coast guard presence are not only aimed at enhancing defense capabilities but also serve as strategic signaling to demonstrate their determination to defend national interests. In this context, Nash Equilibrium is a relevant concept for explaining the behavior of both countries. Nash Equilibrium is a condition where each player has chosen the best strategy based on the strategy chosen by their opponent, so there is no incentive for either party to change its strategy unilaterally (Science Direct, 2020). If the United States maintains its military presence while China continues to strengthen its claims and military activities in the South China Sea, then a unilateral change in strategy by either party will actually worsen its strategic position. A United States that chooses to withdraw will provide space for China to expand its regional influence, while a China that chooses to reduce its activities will be seen as losing bargaining power over its long-held territorial claims.

Consequently, both countries tend to maintain a straightforward strategy, even though they recognize that it carries a high risk of escalation. This situation explains why in recent years the South China Sea has been marked by increased military activity from both countries, but it has not yet escalated into open warfare. Both sides seek to maintain pressure on their opponents without crossing the threshold that could trigger a full-scale conflict. In other words, the strategy employed is to maintain a firm stance while controlling the level of escalation to prevent it from escalating into outright war. This phenomenon demonstrates that the balance created in the South China Sea is an unstable equilibrium. It is stable not because the two countries have reached an agreement, but because each recognizes that the costs of open warfare far outweigh the potential benefits. Nuclear capabilities, high global economic interdependence, and the potential disruption of international trade chains are factors that encourage both countries to remain cautious in their military actions.

Therefore, the US and China's stance in the South China Sea is part of a rational approach to defending their interests. There is a lack of mutual trust to cooperate or reduce tensions in the South China Sea, given the equal likelihood of winning or losing. Therefore, the US and China must maintain a balance of power and strategy in the South China Sea, but avoid escalating to open warfare.

South China Sea Security Stability

The US-China conflict in the South China Sea could impact regional security stability. As previously explained, the US-China conflict in the South China Sea is a conflict of strategic interests. Each country uses coercive methods, such as threats, to defend its interests in the South China Sea. According to Schelling (1960), the use of threats as a foreign policy instrument typically involves a brinkmanship strategy. In such situations, both parties straddle the borderline of conflict, where each action demonstrates seriousness without triggering war. Countries make threats to intimidate their opponents, believing that a small mistake could lead to war. This can be seen in the behavior of the US and China in the South China Sea, where they mutually impose their will while being careful not to trigger a major conflict.

China claims that the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands (two major island groups in the South China Sea) have been Chinese territory since ancient times. The Spratly Islands are currently a major source of tension because China has artificially increased the size of the small islands it currently controls. In addition, China recently installed missiles on Woody Island (Paracel island group), which has made regional neighbors and the US concerned about China's growing military power and ambitions in the SCS region. The territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands is closely related to maritime rights, as the islands and coastal areas are entitled to 12 nautical miles of territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) under

the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China also claims that foreign warships entering the 12-mile territorial zone or EEZ need to obtain permission to do so.

However, the US argued that freedom of navigation should apply in the EEZ and that military activity need not be notified to coastal states. The US subsequently signed defense cooperation agreements with several ASEAN countries and spent \$250 million to assist the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan in developing their naval capabilities. This was done by the US to counter China's growing influence in the South China Sea (Adriana, 2016). The US's stance also demonstrated that the "threats" made by China could be considered credible. Conversely, the "threats" made by the US were also credible because each country only engaged in confrontational actions without seeking a full-blown war. Therefore, the US and China are trapped in a situation of brinkmanship, where both parties seek to defend or enhance their claims and influence, while navigating the risk of escalation that could lead to open conflict (Haun & O'hara, 2022).

The security stability of the South China Sea region could plunge to a higher level of tension if the risk of using "threats" goes unchecked. According to Schelling (1960), countries must remain cautious and able to control the use of these threats, because uncontrolled use of threats can lead to large-scale military conflict. This can be seen in the conditions and situations in the South China Sea in recent years. The escalation of tensions in the South China Sea and its surroundings is demonstrated by President Xi Jinping's statement before the Chinese Armed Forces that he was ready for war at any time (Zhen, 2021). The South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported the Chinese Foreign Minister's statement in Malaysia urging ASEAN countries to unite against "troublemakers" from outside the region. The Chinese military has conducted exercises in the South China Sea waters, including the firing of aircraft carrier-destroying missiles. Chinese anger increased after the US approved the sale of nearly USD 750 million worth of military equipment to Taiwan in 2021, which, according to China, is currently part of its territory (The Jakarta Post, 2021).

Furthermore, tensions have also arisen between China and several ASEAN member countries, particularly the Philippines, in the South China Sea. A collision between a Philippine vessel and a Chinese Coast Guard vessel on December 10, 2023, further exacerbated the dispute over claims in the South China Sea. The Philippine government accused the Chinese Coast Guard of using water cannons to block three Philippine government vessels delivering supplies to fishermen near Scarborough Shoal off Luzon Island. Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels have harassed, blockaded, and maneuvered in ways that endangered the safety of the Philippine crew and even caused damage to a Philippine Civilian Supply Ship carrying out an official supply mission (Lisbet, 2023). The impact of these tensions will disrupt security stability in the South China Sea and further complicate matters. The rational choice for any nation involved in tensions in the South China Sea is to remain cautious in managing escalation to prevent the conflict from escalating to full-scale war. Brinkmanship is inherently risky, as it can appear as if a state is pushing for war (Schelling, 1960).

CONCLUSION

The tension between the US and China in the South China Sea represents a conflict of interests that both sides seek to maintain. China, with its territorial claims and maritime trade routes, is enhancing its military capabilities in the South China Sea to defend its claims. In response, the US has also increased its military activity by conducting several joint exercises in disputed areas of the South China Sea. This confrontational stance and the use of threats as a foreign policy instrument are seen as rational within the framework of a chicken game. This is because each country is suspicious of the other, making cooperation difficult. This situation has

placed the US and China in a state of brinkmanship, forcing them to walk on the edge of conflict. However, every action demonstrates seriousness without triggering war. The tensions in the South China Sea must be carefully calculated by both the US and China to prevent undesirable conditions such as large-scale war from occurring.

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